HANDBOUND
AT THE

UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO PRESS

45.3
I
246

Angels & Ministers

Angels & Ministers

Four Plays of Victorian Shade & Character by Laurence Housman



New York
Harcourt, Brace and Company
1922

412748
2.6.43

PR
4809
H18A75

COPYRIGHT, 1922, BY
HARCOURT, BRACE AND COMPANY, INC.

PRINTED IN THE U. S. A. BY
THE QUINN & BODEN COMPANY
RAHWAY, N. J.

Introduction

THE Victorian era has ceased to be a thing of yesterday; it has become history; and the fixed look of age, no longer contemporary in character, which now grades the period, grades also the once living material which went to its making.

With this period of history those who were once participants in its life can deal more intimately and with more verisimilitude than can those whose literary outlook comes later. We can write of it as no sequent generation will find possible; for we are bone of its bone and flesh of its flesh; and when we go, something goes with us which will require for its reconstruction, not the natural piety of a returned native, such as I claim to be, but the cold, calculating art of literary excursionists whose domicile is elsewhere.

Some while ago, before Mr. Strachey had made the name of Victoria to resound as triumphantly as it does now, a friend asked why I should trouble to resuscitate these Victorian remains. My answer is because I myself am Victorian, and because the Victorianism to which I belong is now passing so rapidly

into history, henceforth to present to the world a colder aspect than that which endears it to my own mind.

The bloom upon the grape only fully appears when it is ripe for death. Then, at a touch, it passes, delicate and evanescent as the frailest blossoms of spring. Just at this moment the Victorian age has that bloom upon it—autumnal, not spring-like—which, in the nature of things, cannot last. That bloom I have tried to illumine before time wipes it away.

Under this rose-shaded lamp of history, domestically designed, I would have these old characters look young again, or not at least as though they belonged to another age. This wick which I have kindled is short, and will not last; but, so long as it does, it throws on them the commentary of a contemporary light. In another generation the bloom which it seeks to irradiate will be gone; nor will anyone then be able to present them to us as they really were.

Contents

PAGE

I. The Queen: God Bless Her! . . . 11
(A Scene from Home-Life in the Highlands)

II. His Favourite Flower 45
(A Political Myth Explained)

III. The Comforter 61
(A Political Finale)

IV. Possession 91
(A Peep-Show in Paradise)

The Queen:
God Bless Her!

Dramatis Personæ

QUEEN VICTORIA
MR. JOHN BROWN
LORD BEACONSFIELD
A FOOTMAN

The Queen: God Bless Her!

A Scene from Home-Life in the Highlands

The august Lady is sitting in a garden-tent on the lawn of Balmoral Castle. Her parasol leans beside her. Writing-materials are on the table before her, and a small fan, for it is hot weather; also a dish of peaches. Sunlight suffuses the tent interior, softening the round contours of the face, and caressing pleasantly the small plump hand busy at letter-writing. The even flow of her penmanship is suddenly disturbed; picking up her parasol, she indulgently beats some unseen object, lying concealed against her skirts.

QUEEN. No: don't scratch! Naughty! Naughty!

(*She then picks up a hand-bell, rings it, and continues her writing. Presently a fine figure of a man in Highland costume appears in the tent-door. He waits awhile, then speaks in the strong Doric of his native wilds.*)

MR. J. BROWN. Was your Majesty wanting anything, or were you ringing only for the fun?

(*To this brusque delivery her Majesty responds with a cosy smile, for the special function of Mr. John Brown is not to be a courtier; and, knowing what is expected of him, he lives up to it.*)

QUEEN. Bring another chair, Brown. And take Mop with you: he wants his walk.

MR. J. B. What kind of a chair are you wanting, Ma'am? Is it to put your feet on?

QUEEN. No, no. It is to put a visitor on. Choose a nice one with a lean-back.

MR. J. B. With a lean back? Ho! Ye mean one that you can lean back in. What talk folk will bring with them from up south, to be sure! Yes, I'll get it for ye, Ma'am. Come, Mop, be a braw little wee mon, and tak' your walk!

(*And while his Royal Mistress resumes her writing, taking Mop by his "lead," he prepares for departure.*)

Have ye seen the paper this morning yet? Ma'am.

(*The address of respect is thrown in by way of afterthought, or, as it were, reluctantly. Having to be in character, his way is to tread heavily on the border-line which divides familiarity from respect.*)

QUEEN. Not yet.

MR. J. B. (*departing*). I'll bring it for ye, now.

QUEEN. You had better send it.

J. B. (*turning about*). What did ye say? . . . Ma'am.

QUEEN. "Send it," Brown, I said. Mop mustn't be hurried. Take him round by the stables.

(*He goes: and the Queen, with a soft, indulgent smile, that slowly flickers out as the labour of composition proceeds, resumes her writing.*)

(*Presently* ENTERS *a liveried Footman, who stands at attention with the paper upon a salver. Touching the table at her side as an indication, the Queen continues to write. With gingerly reverence the man lays down the paper and goes. Twice she looks at it before taking it up; then she unfolds it; then lays it down, and takes out her glasses; then begins reading. Evidently she comes on something she does not like; she pats the table impatiently, then exclaims:*

Most extraordinary!

(*A wasp settles on the peaches.*)

And I wish one could kill all wicked pests as easily as you.

(*She makes a dab with the paper-knife, the wasp escapes.*)

Most extraordinary!

(*Relinquishing the pursuit of wasps, she resumes her reading.*)

(*In a little while Mr. John Brown returns, both hands occupied. The chair he deposits by the tent door, and hitches Mop's "lead" to the back of that on which the Queen is sitting. With the small beginnings of a smile she lowers the paper, and looks at him and his accompaniments.*)

QUEEN. Well, Brown? Oh, yes; that's quite a nice one. . . . I'm sure there's a wasps' nest somewhere; there are so many of them about.

J. B. Eh, don't fash yourself! Wasps have a way of being aboot this time of year. It's the fruit they're after.

QUEEN. Yes: like Adam and Eve.

J. B. That's just it, Ma'am.

QUEEN. You'd better take it away, Brown, or cover it; it's too tempting.

J. B. (*removing the fruit*). Ah! Now if God had only done that, maybe we'd still all be running aboot naked.

QUEEN. I'm glad He didn't, then.

J. B. Ye're right, Ma'am.

QUEEN. The Fall made the human race decent, even if it did no good otherwise. Brown, I've dropped my glasses.

(*He picks them up and returns them.*)

QUEEN. Thank you, Brown.

J. B. So you're expecting a visitor, ye say?

QUEEN. Yes. You haven't seen Lord Beaconsfield yet, I suppose?

J. B. Since he was to arrive off the train, you mean, Ma'am? No: he came early. He's in his room.

QUEEN. I hope they have given him a comfortable one.

J. B. It's the one I used to have. There's a good spring-bed in it, and a kettle-ring for the whisky.

QUEEN. Oh, that's all right, then.

J. B. Will he be staying for long? Ma'am.

QUEEN. Only for a week, I'm afraid. Why?

J. B. It's about the shooting I was thinking: whether it was the deer or the grouse he'd want to be after.

QUEEN. I don't think Lord Beaconsfield is a sportsman.

J. B. I know that, Ma'am, well enough. But there's many who are not sportsmen that think they've got to do it—when they come north of the Tweed.

QUEEN. Lord Beaconsfield will not shoot, I'm sure. You remember him, Brown, being here before?

J. B. Eh! Many years ago, that was; he was no but Mr. Disraeli then. But he was the real thing, Ma'am: oh, a nice gentleman.

QUEEN. He is always very nice to me.

J. B. I remember now, when he first came, he put a tip into me hand. And when I let him know the liberty he had taken, "Well, Mr. Brown," he said, "I've made a mistake, but I don't take it back again!"

QUEEN. Very nice and sensible.

J. B. And indeed it was, Ma'am. Many a man would never have had the wit to leave well alone by just apologising for it. But there was an understandingness about him, that often you don't find.

After that he always talked to me like an equal—just like yourself might do. But Lord, Ma'am, his ignorance, it was surprising!

QUEEN. Most extraordinary you should think that, Brown!

J. B. Ah! You haven't talked to him as I have, Ma'am: only about politics, and poetry, and things like that, where, maybe, he knows a bit more than I do (though he didn't know his Burns so well as a man ought that thinks to make laws for Scotland!). But to hear him talking about natural facts, you'd think he was just inventing for to amuse himself! Do you know, Ma'am, he thought stags had white tails like rabbits, and that 'twas only when they wagged them so as to show, that you could shoot them. And he thought that you pulled a salmon out o' the water as soon as you'd hooked him. And he thought that a haggis was made of a sheep's head boiled in whisky. Oh, he's very innocent, Ma'am, if you get him where he's not expecting you.

QUEEN. Well, Brown, there are some things you can teach him, I don't doubt; and there are some things he can teach you. I'm sure he has taught me a great deal.

J. B. Ay? It's a credit to ye both, then.

QUEEN. He lets me think for myself, Brown; and that's what so many of my ministers would rather I

didn't. They want me to be merely the receptacle of their own opinions. No, Brown, that's what we Stewarts are never going to do!

J. B. Nor would I, Ma'am, if I were in your shoes. But believe me, you can do more, being a mere woman, so to speak, than many a king can do.

QUEEN. Yes; being a woman has its advantages, I know.

J. B. For you can get round 'em, Ma'am; and you can put 'em off; and you can make it very awkward for them—very awkward—to have a difference of opinion with you.

QUEEN (*good-humouredly*). You and I have had differences of opinion sometimes, Brown.

J. B. True, Ma'am; that *has* happened; I've known it happen. And I've never regretted it, never! But the difference there is, Ma'am, that I'm not your Prime Minister. Had I been—you'd 'a been more stiff about giving in—naturally! Now there's Mr. Gladstone, Ma'am; I'm not denying he's a great man; but he's got too many ideas for my liking, far too many! I'm not against temperance any more than he is—put in its right place. But he's got that crazy notion of "local option" in his mind; he's coming to it, gradually. And he doesn't think how giving "local option," to them that don't take

the wide view of things, may do harm to a locality. You must be wide in your views, else you do somebody an injustice.

QUEEN. Yes, Brown; and that is why I like being up in the hills, where the views *are* wide.

J. B. I put it this way, Ma'am. You come to a locality, and you find you can't get served as you are accustomed to be served. Well! you don't go there again, and you tell others not to go; and so the place gets a bad name. I've a brother who keeps an inn down at Aberlochy on the coach route, and he tells me that more than half his customers come from outside the locality.

QUEEN. Of course; naturally!

J. B. Well now, Ma'am, it'll be bad for the locality to have half the custom that comes to it turned away, because of local option! And believe me, Ma'am, that's what it will come to. People living in it won't see till the shoe pinches them; and by that time my brother, and others like him, will have been ruined in their business.

QUEEN. Local option is not going to come yet, Brown.

J. B. (*firmly*). No, Ma'am, not while I vote conservative, it won't. But I was looking ahead; I was talking about Mr. Gladstone.

QUEEN. Mr. Gladstone has retired from politics. At least he is not going to take office again.

J. B. Don't you believe him, Ma'am. Mr. Gladstone is not a retiring character. He's in to-day's paper again—columns of him; have ye seen?

QUEEN. Yes; quite as much as I wish to see.

J. B. And there's something in what he says, I don't deny.

QUEEN. There's a great deal in what he says, I don't understand, and that I don't wish to.

J. B. Now you never said a truer thing than that in your life, Ma'am! That's just how I find him. Oh, but he's a great man; and it's wonderful how he appreciates the Scot, and looks up to his opinion.

(*But this is a line of conversation in which his Royal Mistress declines to be interested. And she is helped, at that moment, by something which really does interest her.*)

QUEEN. Brown, how did you come to scratch your leg?

J. B. 'Twas not me, Ma'am; 'twas the stable cat did that—just now while Mop was having his walk.

QUEEN. Poor dear Brown! Did she fly at you?

J. B. Well, 'twas like this, Ma'am; first Mop went for her, then she went for him. And I tell ye she'd have scraped his eyes out if I'd left it to a finish.

QUEEN. Ferocious creature! She must be mad.

J. B. Well, Ma'am, I don't know whether a cat-and-dog fight is a case of what God hath joined together; but it's the hard thing for man to put asunder! And that's the scraping I got for it, when I tried.

QUEEN. You must have it cauterised, Brown. I won't have you getting hydrophobia.

J. B. You generally get that from dogs.

QUEEN. Oh, from cats too; any cat that a mad dog has bitten.

J. B. They do say, Ma'am, that if a mad dog bites you—you have to die barking. So if it's a cat-bite I'm going to die of, you'll hear me mewing the day, maybe.

QUEEN. I don't like cats: I never did. Treacherous, deceitful creatures! Now a dog always looks up to you.

J. B. Yes, Ma'am; they are tasteful, attractive animals; and that, maybe, is the reason. They give you a good conceit of yourself, dogs do. You never

have to apologise to a dog. Do him an injury—you've only to say you forgive him, and he's friends again.

(*Accepting his views with a nodding smile, she resumes her pen, and spreads paper.*)

QUEEN. Now, Brown, I must get to work again. I have writing to do. See that I'm not disturbed.

J. B. Then when were you wanting to see your visitor, Ma'am? There's his chair waiting.

QUEEN. Ah, yes, to be sure. But I didn't want to worry him too soon. What is the time?

J. B. Nearly twelve, Ma'am.

QUEEN. Oh! then I think I may. Will you go and tell him: the Queen's compliments, and she would like to see him, now?

J. B. I will go and tell him, Ma'am.

QUEEN. And then I shan't want you any more—till this afternoon.

J. B. Then I'll just go across and take lunch at home, Ma'am.

QUEEN. Yes, do! That will be nice for you. And, Brown, mind you have that leg seen to!

(*Mr. John Brown has started to go, when his step is arrested.*)

J. B. His lordship is there in the garden, Ma'am, talking to the Princess.

QUEEN. What, before he has seen *me?* Go, and take him away from the Princess, and tell him to come here!

J. B. I will, Ma'am.

QUEEN. And you had better take Mop with you. Now, dear Brown, do have your poor leg seen to, at once!

J. B. Indeed, and I will, Ma'am. Come, Mop, man! Come and tell his lordship he's wanted.

(EXIT *Mr. John Brown, nicely accompanied by Mop.*)

(*Left to herself the Queen administers a feminine touch or two to dress and cap and hair; then with dignified composure she resumes her writing, and continues to write even when the shadow of her favourite minister crosses the entrance, and he stands hat in hand before her, flawlessly arrayed in a gay frock suit suggestive of the period when male attire was still not only a fashion but an art.*

Despite, however, the studied correctness of his costume, face and deportment give signs of haggard fatigue; and when he

bows it is the droop of a weary man, slow in the recovery. Just at the fitting moment for full acceptance of his silent salutation, the Royal Lady lays down her pen.)

QUEEN. Oh, how do you do, my dear Lord Beaconsfield! Good morning; and welcome to Balmoral.

LORD B. (*as he kisses the hand extended to him*). That word from your Majesty brings all its charms to life! What a prospect of beauty I see around me!

QUEEN. You arrived early? I hope you are sufficiently rested.

LORD B. Refreshed, Madam; rest will come later.

QUEEN. You have had a long, tiring journey, I fear.

LORD B. It was long, Madam.

QUEEN. I hope that you slept upon the train?

LORD B. I lay upon it, Ma'am. That is all I can say truly.

QUEEN. Oh, I'm sorry!

LORD B. There were compensations, Ma'am. In my vigil I was able to look forward—to that which

is now before me. The morning is beautiful! May I be permitted to enquire if your Majesty's health has benefited?

QUEEN. I'm feeling "bonnie," as we say in Scotland. Life out of doors suits me.

LORD B. Ah! This tent light is charming! Then my eyes had not deceived me; your Majesty is already more than better. The tempered sunlight, so tender in its reflections, gives—an interior, one may say—of almost floral delicacy; making these canvas walls like the white petals of an enfolding flower.

QUEEN. Are you writing another of your novels, Lord Beaconsfield? That sounds like composition.

LORD B. Believe me, Madam, only an impromptu.

QUEEN. Now, my dear Lord, pray sit down! I had that chair specially brought for you. Generally I sit here quite alone.

LORD B. Such kind forethought, Madam, overwhelms me! Words are inadequate. I accept, gratefully, the repose you offer me.

(He sinks into the chair, and sits motionless and mute, in a weariness that is not the less genuine because it provides an effect. But from one seated in the Royal

Presence much is expected; and so it is in a tone of sprightly expectancy that his Royal Mistress now prompts him to his task of entertaining her.)

QUEEN. Well? And how is everything?

LORD B. (*rousing himself with an effort*). Oh! Pardon! Your Majesty would have me speak on politics, and affairs of State? I was rapt away for the moment.

QUEEN. Do not be in any hurry, dear Prime Minister.

LORD B. Ah! That word from an indulgent Mistress spurs me freshly to my task. But, Madam, there is almost nothing to tell: politics, like the rest of us, have been taking holiday.

QUEEN. I thought that Mr. Gladstone had been speaking.

LORD B. (*with an airy flourish of courtly disdain*). Oh, yes! He has been—speaking.

QUEEN. In Edinburgh, quite lately.

LORD B. And in more other places than I can count. Speaking—speaking—speaking. But I have to confess, Madam, that I have not read his speeches. They are composed for brains which can find more leisure than yours, Madam—or mine.

QUEEN. I have read some of them.

LORD B. Your Majesty does him great honour—and yourself some inconvenience, I fear. Those speeches, so great a strain to understand, or even to listen to—my hard duty for now some forty years—are a far greater strain to read.

QUEEN. They annoy me intensely. I have no patience with him!

LORD B. Pardon me, Madam; if you have read *one* of his speeches, your patience has been extraordinary.

QUEEN. Can't you stop it?

LORD B. Stop?—stop what, Madam? Niagara, the Flood? That which has no beginning, no limit, has also no end: till, by the operation of nature, it runs dry.

QUEEN. But, surely, he should be stopped when he speaks on matters which may, any day, bring us into war!

LOBD B. Then he would be stopped. When the British nation goes to war, Madam, it ceases to listen to reason. Then it is only the beating of its own great heart that it hears: to that goes the marching of its armies, with victory as the one goal. Then, Madam, above reason rises instinct. Against that he will be powerless.

QUEEN. You think so?

LORD B. I am sure, Madam. If we are drawn into war, his opposition becomes futile. If we are not: well, if we are not, it will not be his doing that we escape that—dire necessity.

QUEEN. But you *do* think it necessary, don't you?

(*To the Sovereign's impetuous eagerness, so creditable to her heart, he replies with the oracular solemnity by which caution can be sublimated.*)

LORD B. I hope it may not be, Madam. We must all say that—up till the last moment. It is the only thing we *can* say, to testify the pacifity of our intention when challenged by other Powers.

QUEEN (*touching the newspaper*). This morning's news isn't good, I'm afraid. The Russians are getting nearer to Constantinople.

LORD B. They will never enter it, Madam.

QUEEN. No, they mustn't! We will not allow it.

LORD B. That, precisely, is the policy of your Majesty's Government. Russia knows that we shall not allow it; she knows that it will never be. Nevertheless, we may have to make a demonstration.

QUEEN. Do you propose to summon Parliament?

LORD B. Not Parliament; no, Madam. Your Majesty's Fleet will be sufficient.

(*This lights a spark; and the royal mind darts into strategy.*)

QUEEN. If I had my way, Lord Beaconsfield, my Fleet would be in the Baltic to-morrow; and before another week was over, Petersburg would be under bombardment.

LORD B. (*considerately providing this castle in the air with its necessary foundations*). And Cronstadt would have fallen.

QUEEN (*puzzled for a moment at this naming of a place which had not entered her calculations*). Cronstadt? Why Cronstadt?

LORD B. Merely preliminary, Madam. When that fortified suburb has crumbled—the rest will be easy.

QUEEN. Yes! And what a good lesson it will teach them! The Crimea wasn't enough for them, I suppose.

LORD B. The Crimea! Ah, what memories—of heroism—that word evokes! "Magnificent, but not war!"

QUEEN. Oh! There is one thing, Lord Beaconsfield, on which I want your advice.

LORD B. Always at your Majesty's disposal.

QUEEN. I wish to confer upon the Sultan of Turkey my Order of the Garter.

LOBD B. Ah! how generous, how generous an instinct! How like you, Madam, to wish it!

QUEEN. What I want to know is, whether, as Prime Minister, you have any objection?

LORD B. "As Prime Minister." How hard that makes it for me to answer! How willingly would I say "None"! How reluctantly, on the contrary, I have to say, "It had better wait."

QUEEN. Wait? Wait till when? I want to do it *now*.

LORD B. Yes, so do I. But can you risk, Madam, conferring that most illustrious symbol of honour, and chivalry, and power, on a defeated monarch? Your royal prestige, Ma'am, must be considered. Great and generous hearts need, more than most, to take prudence into their counsels.

QUEEN. But do you think, Lord Beaconsfield, that the Turks are going to be beaten?

LORD B. The Turks *are* beaten, Madam. . . . But England will never be beaten. We shall dictate terms—moderating the demands of Russia; and

under your Majesty's protection the throne of the Kaliphat will be safe—once more. That, Madam, is the key to our Eastern policy: a grateful Kaliphat, claiming allegiance from the whole Mahometan world, bound to us by instincts of self-preservation—and we hold henceforth the gorgeous East in fee with redoubled security. His power may be a declining power; but ours remains. Some day, who knows? Egypt, possibly even Syria, Arabia, may be our destined reward.

(*Like a cat over a bowl of cream, England's Majesty sits lapping all this up. But, when he has done, her commentary is shrewd and to the point.*)

QUEEN. The French won't like that!

LORD B. They won't, Madam, they won't. But has it ever been England's policy, Madam, to mind what the French don't like?

QUEEN (*with relish*). No, it never has been, has it? Ah! you are the true statesman, Lord Beaconsfield. Mr. Gladstone never talked to me like that.

LORD B. (*courteously surprised at what does not at all surprise him*). No? . . . You must have had interesting conversations with him, Madam, in the past.

QUEEN (*very emphatically*). I have never once had

a conversation with Mr. Gladstone, in all my life, Lord Beaconsfield. He used to talk to me as if I were a public meeting—and one that agreed with him, too!

LORD B. Was there, then, any applause, Madam?

QUEEN. No, indeed! I was too shy to say what I thought. I used to cough sometimes.

LORD B. Rather like coughing at a balloon, I fear. I have always admired his flights—regarded as a mere *tour de force*—so buoyant, so sustained, so incalculable! But, as they never touch earth to any serviceable end, that I could discover—of what use are they? Yet if there is one man who has helped me in my career—to whom, therefore, I should owe gratitude—it is he.

QUEEN. Indeed? Now that does surprise me! Tell me, Lord Beaconsfield, how has he ever helped you?

LORD B. In our party system, Madam, we live by the mistakes of our opponents. The balance of the popular verdict swings ever this way and that, relegating us either to victory or defeat, to office or to opposition. Many times have I trodden the road to power, or passed from it again, over ruins the origin of which I could recognise either as my own work or that of another; and most of all has it been over

the disappointments, the disaffections, the disgusts, the disillusionments—chiefly among his own party—which my great opponent has left me to profit by. I have gained experience from what he has been morally blind to; what he has lacked in understanding of human nature he has left for me to discover. Only to-day I learn that he has been in the habit of addressing—as you, Madam, so wittily phrased it—of addressing, "as though she were a public meeting," that Royal Mistress, whom it has ever been my most difficult task not to address sometimes as the most charming, the most accomplished, and the most fascinating woman of the epoch which bears her name. (*He pauses, then resumes.*) How strange a fatality directs the fate of each one of us! How fortunate is he who knows the limits that destiny assigns to him: limits beyond which no word must be uttered.

(*His oratorical flight, so buoyant and sustained, having come to its calculated end, he drops deftly to earth, encountering directly for the first time the flattered smile with which the Queen has listened to him.*)

Madam, your kind silence reminds me, in the gentlest, the most considerate way possible, that I am not here to relieve the tedium of a life made lonely by a bereavement equal to your own, in con-

versation however beguiling, or in quest of a sympathy of which, I dare to say, I feel assured. For, in a sense, it is as to a public assembly, or rather as to a great institution, immemorially venerable and august, that I have to address myself when, obedient to your summons, I come to be consulted as your Majesty's First Minister of State. If, therefore, your royal mind have any inquiries, any further commands to lay upon me, I am here, Madam, to give effect to them in so far as I can.

(*This time he has really finished, but with so artful an abbreviation at the point where her interest has been most roused that the Queen would fain have him go on. And so the conversation continues to flow along intimate channels.*)

QUEEN. No, dear Lord Beaconsfield, not to-day! Those official matters can wait. After you have said so much, and said it so beautifully, I would rather still talk with you as a friend. Of friends you and I have not many; those who make up our world, for the most part, we have to keep at a distance. But while I have many near relatives, children and descendants, I remember that you have none. So your case is the harder.

LORD B. Ah, no, Madam, indeed! I have my children—descendants who will live after me, I

trust—in those policies which, for the welfare of my beloved country, I confide to the care of a Sovereign whom I revere and love. . . . I am not unhappy in my life, Madam; far less in my fortune; only, as age creeps on, I find myself so lonely, so solitary, that sometimes I have doubt whether I am really alive, or whether the voice, with which now and then I seek to reassure myself, be not the voice of a dead man.

QUEEN (*almost tearfully*). No, no, my dear Lord Beaconsfield, you mustn't say that!

LORD B. (*gallantly*). I won't say anything, Madam, that you forbid, or that you dislike. You invited me to speak to you as a friend; so I have done, so I do. I apologise that I have allowed sadness, even for a moment, to trouble the harmony—the sweetness—of our conversation.

QUEEN. Pray, do not apologise! It has been a very great privilege; I beg that you will go on! Tell me—you spoke of bereavement—I wish you would tell me more—about your wife.

(*The sudden request touches some latent chord; and it is with genuine emotion that he answers.*)

LORD B. Ah! My wife! To her I owed everything.

QUEEN. She was devoted to you, wasn't she?

LORD B. I never read the depth of her devotion—till after her death. Then, Madam—this I have told to nobody but yourself—then I found among her papers—addressed "to my dear husband"—a message, written only a few days before her death, with a hand shaken by that nerve-racking and fatal malady which she endured so patiently—begging me to marry again.

(*The Queen is now really crying, and finds speech difficult.*)

QUEEN. And you, you—? Dear Lord Beaconsfield; did you mean—had you ever meant——?

LORD B. I did not then, Madam; nor have I ever done so since. It is enough if I allow myself—to love.

QUEEN. Oh, yes, yes; I understand—better than others would. For that has always been my own feeling.

LORD B. In the history of my race, Madam, there has been a great tradition of faithfulness between husbands and wives. For the hardness of our hearts, we are told, Moses permitted us to give a writing of divorcement. But we have seldom acted on it. In my youth I became a Christian; I married a Christian. But that was no reason for me to desert the

nobler traditions of my race—for they are in the blood and in the heart. When my wife died I had no thought to marry again; and when I came upon that tender wish, still I had no thought for it; my mind would not change. Circumstances that have happened since have sealed irrevocably my resolution—never to marry again.

QUEEN. Oh, I think that is so wise, so right, so noble of you!

(*The old Statesman rises, pauses, appears to hesitate, then in a voice charged with emotion says*)

LORD B. Madam, will you permit me to kiss your hand?

(*The hand graciously given, and the kiss fervently implanted, he falls back once more to a respectful distance. But the emotional excitement of the interview has told upon him, and it is in a wavering voice of weariness that he now speaks.*)

LORD B. You have been very forbearing with me, Madam, not to indicate that I have outstayed either my welcome or your powers of endurance. Yet so much conversation must necessarily have tired you. May I then crave permission, Madam, to withdraw? For, to speak truly, I do need some rest.

QUEEN. Yes, my dear friend, go and rest yourself! But before you go, will you not wait, and take a glass of wine with me?

(*He bows, and she rings.*)

And there is just one other thing I wish to say before we part.

LORD B. Speak, Madam, for thy servant heareth.

(*The other servant is now also standing to attention, awaiting orders.*)

QUEEN. Bring some wine.

(*The Attendant* GOES.)

That Order of the Garter which I had intended to confer upon the Sultan—have you, as Prime Minister, any objection if I bestow it nearer home, on one to whom personally—I cannot say more—on yourself, I mean?

(*At that pronouncement of the royal favour, the Minister stands, exhausted of energy, in an attitude of drooping humility. The eloquent silence is broken presently by the Queen.*)

QUEEN. Dear Lord Beaconsfield, I want your answer.

LORD B. Oh, Madam! What adequate answer can these poor lips make to so magnificent an offer?

Yet answer I must. We have spoken together briefly to-day of our policies in the Near East. Madam, let me come to you again when I have saved Constantinople, and secured once more upon a firm basis the peace of Europe. Then ask me again whether I have any objection, and I will own—"I have none!"

(RE-ENTERS *Attendant. He deposits a tray with decanter and glasses, and retires again.*)

QUEEN. Very well, Lord Beaconsfield. And if you do not remind me, I shall remind you. (*She points to the tray.*) Pray, help yourself!

(*He takes up the decanter.*)

LORD B. I serve you, Madam?

QUEEN. Thank you.

(*He fills the two glasses; presents hers to the Queen, and takes up his own.*)

LORD B. May I propose for myself—a toast, Madam?

(*The Queen sees what is coming, and bows graciously.*)

LORD B. The Queen! God bless her!

(*He drains the glass, then breaks it against*

the pole of the tent, and throws away the stem.)

An old custom, Madam, observed by loyal defenders of the House of Stewart, so that no lesser health might ever be drunk from the same glass. To my old hand came a sudden access of youthful enthusiasm—an ardour which I could not restrain. Your pardon, Madam!

QUEEN (*very gently*). Go and lie down, Lord Beaconsfield; you need rest.

LORD B. Adieu, Madam.

QUEEN. Draw your curtains, and sleep well!

(*For a moment he stands gazing at her with a look of deep emotion; he tries to speak. Ordinary words seem to fail; he falters into poetry.*)

"When pain and anguish wring the brow,
A ministering Angel, thou! "

(*It has been beautifully said, they both feel. Silent and slow, with head reverentially bowed, he backs from the Presence.*)

(*The Queen sits and looks after the retreating figure, then at the broken fragments of glass. She takes up the hand-bell and rings. The Attendant* ENTERS.)

QUEEN. Pick up that broken glass.

(*The Attendant collects it on the hand-tray which he carries.*)

Bring it to me! . . . Leave it!

(*The Attendant deposits the tray before her, and* GOES. *Gently the Queen handles the broken pieces. Then in a voice of tearful emotion she speaks.*)

Such devotion! Most extraordinary! Oh, Albert! Albert!

(*And in the sixteenth year of her widowhood and the fortieth of her reign the Royal Lady bends her head over the fragments of broken glass, and weeps happy tears.*)

CURTAIN

His Favourite Flower

Dramatis Personæ

THE STATESMAN
THE HOUSEKEEPER
THE DOCTOR
THE PRIMROSES

His Favourite Flower

A Political Myth Explained

The eminent old Statesman has not been at all well. He is sitting up in his room, and his doctor has come to see him for the third time in three days. This means that the malady is not yet seriously regarded: once a day is still sufficient. Nevertheless, he is a woeful wreck to look at; and the doctor looks at him with the greatest respect, and listens to his querulous plaint patiently. For that great dome of silence, his brain, repository of so many state-secrets, is still a redoubtable instrument: its wit and its magician's cunning have not yet lapsed into the dull inane of senile decay. Though fallen from power, after a bad beating at the polls, there is no knowing but that he may rise again, and hold once more in those tired old hands, shiny with rheumatic gout, and now twitching feebly under the discomfort of a superimposed malady, the reins of democratic and imperial power. The dark, cavernous eyes still wear their look of accumulated wisdom, a touch

also of visionary fire. The sparse locks, dyed to a raven black, set off with their uncanny sheen the clay-like pallor of the face. He sits in a high-backed chair, wrapped in an oriental dressing-gown, his muffled feet resting on a large hot-water bottle; and the eminent physician, preparatory to taking a seat at his side, bends solicitously over him.

DOCTOR. Well, my dear lord, how are you to-day? Better? You look better.

STATESMAN. Yes, I suppose I am better. But my sleep isn't what it ought to be. I have had a dream, Doctor; and it has upset me.

DOCTOR. A dream?

STATESMAN. You wonder that I should mention it? Of course, I—I don't believe in dreams. Yet they indicate, sometimes—do they not?—certain disorders of the mind.

DOCTOR. Generally of the stomach.

STATESMAN. Ah! The same thing, Doctor. There's no getting away from that in one's old age; when one has lived as well as I have.

DOCTOR. That is why I dieted you.

STATESMAN. Oh, I have nothing on my conscience as to that. My housekeeper is a dragon. Her fidelity is of the kind that will even risk dismissal.

DOCTOR. An invaluable person, under the circumstances.

STATESMAN. Yes; a nuisance, but indispensable. No, Doctor. This dream didn't come from the stomach. It seemed rather to emanate from that outer darkness which surrounds man's destiny. So real, so horribly real!

DOCTOR. Better, then, not to brood on it.

STATESMAN. Ah! Could I explain it, then I might get rid of it. In the ancient religion of my race dreams found their interpretation. But have they any?

DOCTOR. Medical science is beginning to say "Yes"; that in sleep the subconscious mind has its reactions.

STATESMAN. Well, I wonder how my "subconscious mind" got hold of primroses.

DOCTOR. Primroses? Did they form a feature in your dream?

STATESMAN. A feature? No. The whole place was alive with them! As the victim of inebriety sees snakes, I saw primroses. They were everywhere: they fawned on me in wreaths and festoons; swarmed over me like parasites; flew at me like flies; till it seemed that the whole world had con-

spired to suffocate me under a sulphurous canopy of those detestable little atoms. Can you imagine the horror of it, Doctor, to a sane—a hitherto sane mind like mine?

DOCTOR. Oh! In a dream any figment may excite aversion.

STATESMAN. This wasn't like a dream. It was rather the threat of some new disease, some brain malady about to descend on me: possibly delirium tremens. I have not been of abstemious habits, Doctor. Suppose——?

DOCTOR. Impossible! Dismiss altogether that supposition from your mind!

STATESMAN. Well, Doctor, I hope—I hope you may be right. For I assure you that the horror I then conceived for those pale botanical specimens in their pestiferous and increscent abundance, exceeded what words can describe. I have felt spiritually devastated ever since, as though some vast calamity were about to fall not only on my own intellect, but on that of my country. Well, you shall hear.

(*He draws his trembling hands wearily over his face, and sits thinking awhile.*)

With all the harsh abruptness of a soul launched into eternity by the jerk of the hangman's rope, so I found myself precipitated into the midst of this

dream. I was standing on a pillory, set up in Parliament Square, facing the Abbey. I could see the hands of St. Margaret's clock pointing to half-past eleven; and away to the left the roof of Westminster Hall undergoing restoration. Details, Doctor, which gave a curious reality to a scene otherwise fantastic, unbelievable. There I stood in a pillory, raised up from earth; and a great crowd had gathered to look at me. I can only describe it as a primrose crowd. The disease infected all, but not so badly as it did me. The yellow contagion spread everywhere; from all the streets around, the botanical deluge continued to flow in upon me. I felt a pressure at my back; a man had placed a ladder against it; he mounted and hung a large wreath of primroses about my neck. The sniggering crowd applauded the indignity. Having placed a smaller wreath upon my head, he descended. . . . A mockery of a May Queen, there I stood!

DOCTOR (*laying a soothing hand on him*). A dream, my dear lord, only a dream.

STATESMAN. Doctor, imagine my feelings! My sense of ridicule was keen; but keener my sense of the injustice—not to be allowed to know *why* the whole world was thus making mock of me. For this was in the nature of a public celebration, its malignity was organised and national; a new fifth of November had been sprung upon the calendar. Around me I

saw the emblematic watchwords of the great party I had once led to triumph: "Imperium et Libertas," "Peace with Honour," "England shall reign where'er the sun," and other mottoes of a like kind; and on them also the floral disease had spread itself. The air grew thick and heavy with its sick-room odour. Doctor, I could have vomited.

DOCTOR. Yes, yes; a touch of biliousness, I don't doubt.

STATESMAN. With a sudden flash of insight—"This," I said to myself, "is my Day of Judgment. Here I stand, judged by my fellow-countrymen, for the failures and shortcomings of my political career. The good intentions with which my path was strewn are now turned to my reproach. But why do they take this particular form? Why—why primroses?"

DOCTOR. "The primrose way" possibly?

STATESMAN. Ah! That occurred to me. But has it, indeed, been a primrose way that I have trodden so long and so painfully? I think not. I cannot so accuse myself. But suppose the Day of Judgment which Fate reserves for us were fundamentally this: the appraisement of one's life and character—not by the all-seeing Eye of Heaven (before which I would bow), but by the vindictively unjust verdict of the people one has tried to serve—the judgment not of

God, but of public opinion. That is a judgment of which all who strive for power must admit the relevancy!

DOCTOR. You distress yourself unnecessarily, dear lord. Your reputation is safe from detraction now.

STATESMAN. With urgency I set my mind to meet the charge. If I could understand the meaning of that yellow visitation, then I should no longer have to fear that I was going mad!

(*At this point the door is discreetly opened, and the Housekeeper, mild, benign, but inflexible,* ENTERS, *carrying a cup and toast-rack upon a tray.*)

HOUSEKEEPER. I beg pardon, my lord; but I think your lordship ought to have your beef-tea now.

STATESMAN. Yes, yes, Mrs. Manson; come in.

DOCTOR. You are right, Mrs. Manson; he ought.

HOUSEKEEPER (*placing the tray on a small stand*). Where will you have it, my lord?

STATESMAN. In my inside, Mrs. Manson—presently—he, he!

DOCTOR. Now, let me take your pulse. . . . Yes, yes. Pretty good, you know.

(*Mrs. Manson stands respectfully at attention with interrogation in her eye.*)

STATESMAN. Yes, you may bring me my cap now. (*Then to the Doctor*). I generally sleep after this.

(*Mrs. Manson brings a large tasselled fez of brilliant color, and adjusts it to his head while he drinks. She then goes to the door, takes a hot-water bottle from the hands of an unseen servant and effects the necessary changes. All this is done so unobtrusively that the Statesman resumes his theme without regarding her. When she has done she goes.*)

Ah! Where was I?

DOCTOR. If you "could understand," you said.

STATESMAN. Ah, yes; understand. Again a strange faculty of divination came upon me. I stood upon the international plane, amid a congress of Powers, and let my eye travel once more over the Alliances of Europe. I looked, Doctor, and truly I saw, then, surprising shifts and changes in the political and diplomatic fabric which I had helped to frame. Time, and kingdoms had passed. I saw, at home and abroad, the rise of new parties into power, strange coalitions, defections, alliances; old balances destroyed, new balances set up in their place. I saw

frontiers annulled, treaties violated, world-problems tumbling like clowns, standing on their heads and crying, " Here we are again! " Power—after all, had solved nothing!

My eye travelled over that problem of the Near East, which, for some generations at least, we thought to have settled, to Vienna, Petersburg, Constantinople —and away farther East to Teheran and—that other place whose name I have forgotten. And, as I looked, a Recording Angel came, and cried to me in a voice strangely familiar, the voice of one of my most detested colleagues—trusted, I mean—" You have put your money on the wrong horse! "

And I had, Doctor; if what I saw then was true—I had! Yes, if ever man blundered and fooled his countrymen into a false and fatal position—I was that man! It wasn't a question of right or wrong. In politics that doesn't really matter; you decide on a course, and you invent moral reasons for it afterwards. No, what I had done was much worse than any mere wrongdoing. All my political foresight and achievements were a gamble that had gone wrong; and for that my Day of Judgment had come, and I stood in the pillory, a peepshow for mockery. But why for their instrument of torture did they choose primroses? Oh, I can invent a reason! It was Moses Primrose, cheated of his horse with a gross of green spectacles cased in shagreen. But that was not the reason. For then came new insight, and a

fresh humiliation. As I looked more intently I saw that I was *not* being mocked; I was being worshipped, adulated, flattered; I had become a god—for party purposes perhaps—and this was my day, given in my honour for national celebration. And I saw, by the insight given me, that they were praising me *for having put their money on the wrong horse!* Year by year the celebration had gone on, until they had so got into the habit that they could not leave off! All my achievements, all my policies, all my statecraft were in the dust; but the worship of me had become a national habit—so foolish and meaningless, that nothing, nothing but some vast calamity—some great social upheaval, was ever going to stop it.

DOCTOR. My dear lord, it is I who must stop it now. You mustn't go on.

STATESMAN. I have done, Doctor. There I have given you the essentials of my dream; material depressing enough for the mind of an old man, enfeebled by indisposition, at the end of a long day's work. But I tell you, Doctor, that nothing therein which stands explainable fills me with such repulsion and aversion as that one thing which I cannot explain —why, why primroses?

DOCTOR. A remarkable dream, my lord; rendered more vivid—or, as you say, " real "—by your present disturbed state of health. As to that part of it

which you find so inexplicable, I can at least point toward where the explanation lies. It reduces itself to this: primroses had become associated for you—in a way which you have forgotten—with something you wished to avoid. And so they became the image, or symbol, of your aversion; and as such found a place in your dream.

(*So saying the doctor rises and moves toward the window, where his attention suddenly becomes riveted.*)

STATESMAN. Perhaps, Doctor, perhaps, as you say there is some such explanation. But I don't feel like that.

DOCTOR. Why, here are primroses! This may be the clue? Where do they come from?

STATESMAN. Ah, those! Indeed, I had forgotten them. At least; no, I could not have done that.

DOCTOR. There is a written card with them, I see.

STATESMAN. Her Gracious Majesty did me the great honour, hearing that I was ill, to send and inquire. Of course, since my removal from office, the opportunity of presenting my personal homage has not been what it used to be. That, I suppose, is as well.

DOCTOR. And these are from her Majesty?

STATESMAN. They came yesterday, brought by a special messenger, with a note written by her own hand, saying that she had picked them herself. To so great a condescension I made with all endeavour what return I could. I wrote—a difficult thing for me to do, Doctor, just now—presented my humble duty, my thanks; and said they were my favourite flower.

DOCTOR. And were they?

STATESMAN. Of course, Doctor, under those circumstances any flower would have been. It just happened to be that.

DOCTOR. Well, my lord, there, then, the matter is explained. You *had* primroses upon your mind. The difficulty, the pain even, of writing with your crippled hand, became associated with them. You would have much rather not had to write; and the disinclination, in an exaggerated form, got into your dream. Now that, I hope, mitigates for you the annoyance—the distress of mind.

STATESMAN. Yes, yes. It does, as you say, make it more understandable. Bring them to me, Doctor; let me look my enemy in the face.

(*The Doctor carries the bowl across and sets it beside him. Very feebly he reaches out a hand and takes some.*)

My favourite flower. He—he! My favourite flower.

(*Lassitude overtakes him—his head nods and droops as he speaks.*)

A primrose by the river's brim
A yellow primrose was to him,
And it was nothing more.

Who was it wrote that?—Byron or Dr. Watts? My memory isn't what it used to be. No matter. It all goes into the account.

My favourite flower!
" For I'm to be Queen of the May, mother, I'm to be Queen of the May! "

(*The Doctor takes up his hat, and tiptoes to the door.*)

Tell me, where is fancy bred,
Or in the heart or in the head?
How begot, how nourished?

(*He breaks, and lets the petals fall one by one.*)
(*The Doctor goes out.*)

Let us all ring fancy's knell;
I'll begin it—Ding-dong bell,
Ding-dong, bell.

(*He goes to sleep.*)

CURTAIN

The Comforter

Dramatis Personæ

W. E. Gladstone
Mrs. Gladstone
Lord Rendel
Mr. John Morley
A Parlour-Maid

The Comforter

A Political Finale

The Scene is a sitting-room in Downing Street. The date March, 1894. *The time* 10.30 *p.m.*

Mrs. Gladstone sits before the fire, on a sofa comfortable for two, finishing off a piece of knitting. Apparently she has just rung the bell, on the arrival from the dining-room of her husband and his two guests, for presently the door opens and the maid presents herself for orders. Mr. Gladstone takes down from the bookshelf a backgammon board, which he opens upon a small table somewhat distant from the fireplace.

GLADSTONE. Well, Rendel, draughts, or backgammon?

RENDEL. It was backgammon you promised me.

GLADSTONE. A rubber?

RENDEL. I shall be delighted.

(*They seat themselves, and begin to set the board. Mr. Morley stands detached looking on, grave, not quite at ease.*)

MRS. G. (*to the parlour-maid*). Jane, bring up the wine, and some biscuits.

JANE. Whisky, ma'am?

MRS. G. No, no; biscuits. Soft biscuits for the other gentlemen, and some hard ones for the master.

JANE. Yes, ma'am.

(*She goes, and in a few minutes returns, sets wine and biscuits on the side-table, and retires.*)

MORLEY (*to* GLADSTONE). Now?

GLADSTONE. If you will be so good, my dear Morley, I shall be much obliged.

(*Slowly and thoughtfully Mr. Morley goes over to fireplace, where he stands looking at Mrs. Gladstone, who is now beginning to "cast-off" a completed piece of knitting. The rattle of the dice is heard.*)

GLADSTONE. You play.

(*Thereafter, as the game proceeds, the dice are heard constantly.*)

MORLEY. Well, dear lady?

MRS. G. Well, Mr. Morley? So Mr. Gladstone is at his game, and has sent you to talk to me.

MORLEY. Precisely. You have guessed right.

MRS. G. He always thinks of me.

MORLEY. Yes.

MRS. G. Won't you sit down, Mr. Morley?

MORLEY. By you? With pleasure.

MRS. G. And how is the world using you?

MORLEY. Like Balaam's ass. The angel of the Lord stands before me with a drawn sword, and my knees quail under me.

MRS. G. I thought you didn't believe in angels, Mr. Morley.

MORLEY. In the scriptural sense, no. In the political, they are rare; but one meets them—sometimes.

MRS. G. And then they frighten you?

MORLEY. They make a coward of me. I want to temporise—put off the inevitable. But it's no good. Angels have to be faced. That's the demand they make on us.

MRS. G. You have something on your mind.

MORLEY. Yes. But we'll not talk about it—yet.

MRS. G. I have something on mine.

MORLEY. Anything serious?

MRS. G. It concerns you, Mr. Morley. Would you very much mind accepting a gift not originally intended for you?

MORLEY. I have accepted office on those terms before now.

MRS. G. Ah! Mr. Gladstone has always so trusted you.

MORLEY. Yes.

MRS. G. More than he has most people.

MORLEY. I have been finding that out. It has become a habit, I'm afraid. I can't cure him.

MRS. G. What I had on my mind, Mr. Morley, was this: I have knitted this comforter for you; at least, it's for you if you would like it.

MORLEY. Angel!

MRS. G. Does that mean that you don't want it?

MORLEY. Oh, no! It will be very good discipline for me; made by you, I shall have to wear it.

MRS. G. But you know, it's a very remarkable thing that I *can* offer it you. Ever since we married

I have been knitting comforters for Mr. Gladstone, which he has always either been losing or giving away. This is the first time I have been able to get ahead of him. He still has two. Isn't that a triumph?

MORLEY. It is, indeed.

MRS. G. He's more careful now, and doesn't lose them. He begins to feel, I suppose, that he's getting old—and needs them.

MORLEY. You surprise me! Why, he is not yet ninety!

MRS. G. Do you know, he still sleeps like a child! Sometimes I lie awake to watch him. It's wonderful!

MORLEY. It's habit, madam; that, and force of will.

MRS. G. And really it is only then I can feel that he quite belongs to me. All the rest of the time it's a struggle.

MORLEY. In which you have won.

MRS. G. Have I?

MORLEY. Every time.

MRS. G. (*wistfully*). Do I, Mr. Morley?

MORLEY. It is you, more than anything, who have kept him young.

MRS. G. Oh, no! I'm the ageing influence.

MORLEY. I don't believe it.

MRS. G. Yes; I stand for caution, prudence. He's like a great boy. . . . You don't think so; you see the other side of his character. But here have I been, sixty years, trying to make him take advice!

MORLEY. And sometimes succeeding. Gods, and their makers! What a strange world!

MRS. G. Spending one's life feeding a god on beef-tea, that's been my work. (*The dear lady sighs.*)

MORLEY. And making comforters for him.

MRS. G. It's terrible when he won't take it!

MORLEY. The beef-tea?

MRS. G. No, the advice. For I'm generally right, you know.

MORLEY. I can well believe it. Strange to think how the welfare and destiny of the nation have sometimes lain here—in this gentle hand.

MRS. G. We do jump in the dark so, don't we? Who can say what is really best for anyone?

MORLEY. And prescribing for a god is more difficult.

MRS. G. Much more.

MORLEY. So when he comes to ask a mere mortal for advice—well, now you must judge how difficult it has been for *me!*

MRS. G. Have you been giving him advice?

MORLEY. In a way; yes.

MRS. G. And has he taken it?

MORLEY. A few days ago he told me of a resolution he had come to. I could not disapprove. But now I wonder how it is going to strike *you?*

MRS. G. Has anything special happened? He has not told me.

MORLEY (*gravely*). To-morrow, or the day after, he will be going down to Windsor.

MRS. G. Oh, I'm sorry! That always depresses him. He and the Queen don't get on very well together.

MORLEY. They will get on well enough this time, I imagine.

MRS. G. (*a little bit alarmed*). Does that mean—any change of policy?

MORLEY. Of policy—I hope not. Of person—yes.

MRS. G. Is anyone leaving the Cabinet?

MORLEY. We may all be leaving it, very soon. He asked me to tell you; he had promised Rendel a game. Look how he is enjoying it!

MRS. G. (*shrewdly*). Ah! then I expect he is winning.

MORLEY. Oh? I should not have called him a bad loser.

MRS. G. No; but he likes winning better—the excitement of it.

MORLEY. That is only human. Yes, he has been a great winner—sometimes.

MRS. G. When has he ever lost—except just for the time? He always knows that.

MORLEY. Ah, yes! To quote your own sprightly phrase, we—he and the party with him—are always "popping up again."

MRS. G. When did I say that?

MORLEY. Seven years ago, when we began to win bye-elections on the Irish question. The bye-elections are not going so well for us just now.

MRS. G. But the General Election will.

MORLEY. Perhaps one will—in another seven years or so.

MRS. G. But isn't there to be one this year?

MORLEY (*gravely*). The Cabinet has decided against it.

MRS. G. But Mr. Morley! Now the Lords have thrown out the Irish Bill there must be an election.

MORLEY. That was Mr. Gladstone's view.

MRS. G. Wasn't it yours, too?

MORLEY. Yes; but we couldn't—we couldn't carry the others.

MRS. G. Then you mean Mr. Gladstone is going to form a new Cabinet?

MORLEY. No. A new Cabinet is going to be formed, but he will not be in it. That is his resolution. I was to tell you.

(*At this news of the downfall of her hopes the gentle face becomes piteously woeful; full of wonder also.*)

MRS. G. He asked you—to tell me that!

MORLEY. Yes.

MRS. G. Oh! Then he really means it! Had he been in any doubt he would have consulted me.

(*Tears have now come to sustain the dear lady in her sense of desolation. Mr. Morley, with quiet philosophy, does his best to give comfort.*)

MORLEY. It was the only thing to do. Ireland kept him in politics; if that goes, he goes with it.

MRS. G. But Ireland—doesn't go.

MORLEY. As the cause for a General Election it goes, I'm afraid.

MRS. G. But that isn't honest, Mr. Morley!

MORLEY. I agree.

MRS. G. And it won't do any good—not in the end.

MORLEY. To that also, I agree. Ireland remains; and the problem will get worse.

MRS. G. But, indeed, you are wrong, Mr. Morley! It was not Ireland that kept my husband in politics; it was Mr. Chamberlain.

MORLEY. That is a view which, I confess, had not occurred to me. Chamberlain?

MRS. G. No one could have kept Mr. Chamberlain from leading the Liberal party, except Mr. Gladstone. And now he never will!

MORLEY. That, certainly, is a triumph, of a kind. You think that influenced him? Chamberlain was a friend of mine once—is still, in a way. (*He pauses, then adds ruefully*) Politics are a cruel game!

(*He sighs and sits depressed. But mention of her husband's great antagonist has made the old lady brisk again.*)

MRS. G. Do you know, Mr. Morley, that if Mr. Gladstone had not made me pray for that man every night of my life, I should positively have hated him.

MORLEY (*with a touch of mischief*). You do that? —still? Tell me—(I am curious)—do you pray for him as plain "Joe Chamberlain," or do you put in the "Mister"?

MRS. G. I never mention his name at all; I leave that to Providence—to be understood.

MORLEY. Well, it *has* been understood, and answered—abundantly; Chamberlain's star is in the ascendant again. It's strange; he and Mr. Gladstone never really got on together.

MRS. G. I don't think he ever really tried—much.

MORLEY. Didn't he? Oh, you don't mean Mr. Gladstone?

MRS. G. And then, you see, the Queen never liked him. That has counted for a good deal.

MORLEY. It has—curiously.

MRS. G. Now why should it, Mr. Morley? She ought not to have such power—any more than I.

MORLEY. How can it be kept from either of you? During the last decade this country has been living on two rival catchwords, which in the field of politics have meant much—the "Widow at Windsor," and the "Grand Old Man." And these two makers of history are mentally and temperamentally incompatible. That has been the tragedy. This is *her* day, dear lady; but it won't always be so.

MRS. G. Mr. Morley, who is going to be—who will take Mr. Gladstone's place?

MORLEY. Difficult to say: the Queen may make her own choice. Spencer, perhaps; though I rather doubt it; probably Harcourt.

MRS. G. Shall you serve under him?

MORLEY. I haven't decided.

MRS. G. You won't.

MORLEY. Possibly not. We are at the end of a dispensation. Whether I belong to the new one, I don't yet know.

MRS. G. The Queen will be pleased, at any rate.

MORLEY. Delighted.

MRS. G. Will she offer him a peerage, do you think?

MORLEY. Oh, of course.

MRS. G. Yes. And she knows he won't accept it. So that gives her the advantage of seeming—magnanimous!

MORLEY. Dear lady, you say rather terrible things —sometimes! You pray for the Queen, too, I suppose; or don't you?

MRS. G. Oh yes; but that's different. I don't feel with her that it's personal. She was always against him. It was her bringing up; she couldn't help being.

MORLEY. So was Chamberlain; so was Harcourt; so was everybody. He is the loneliest man, in a great position, that I have ever known.

MRS. G. Till he met you, Mr. Morley.

MORLEY. I was only speaking of politics. Sixty years ago he met *you*.

MRS. G. Nearly sixty-three.

MORLEY. Three to the good; all the better!

MRS. G. (*having finished off the comforter*). There! that is finished now!

MORLEY. A thousand thanks; so it is to be mine, is it?

MRS. G. I wanted to say, Mr. Morley, how good I think you have always been to me.

MORLEY. I, dear lady? I?

MRS. G. I must so often have been in the way without knowing it. You see, you and I think differently. We belong to different schools.

MORLEY. If you go on, I shall have to say "angel," again. That is all I *can* say.

MRS. G. (*tremulously*). Oh, Mr. Morley, you will tell me! Is this the end? Has he—has he, after all, been a failure?

MORLEY. My dear lady, he has been an epoch.

MRS. G. Aren't epochs failures, sometimes?

MORLEY. Even so, they count; we have to reckon with them. No, he is no failure; though it may seem like it just now. Don't pay too much attention to what the papers will say. He doesn't, though he reads them. Look at him now!—does that look like failure?

(*He points to the exuberantly energetic figure intensely absorbed in its game.*)

MRS. G. He is putting it on to-night a little, for *me,* Mr. Morley. He knows I am watching him. Tell me how he seemed when he first spoke to you. Was he feeling it—much?

MORLEY. Oh, deeply, of course! He believes that on a direct appeal we could win the election.

MRS. G. And you?

MORLEY. I don't. But all the same I hold it the right thing to do. Great causes must face and number their defeats. That is how they come to victory.

MRS. G. And now that will be in other hands, not his. Suppose he should not live to see it. Oh, Mr. Morley, Mr. Morley, how am I going to bear it!

MORLEY. Dear lady, I don't usually praise the great altitudes. May I speak in his praise, just for once, to-night? As a rather faithless man myself—

not believing or expecting too much of human nature —I see him now, looking back, more than anything else as a man of faith.

MRS. G. Ah, yes. To him religion has always meant everything.

MORLEY. Faith in himself, I meant.

MRS. G. Of course; he had to have that, too.

MORLEY. And I believe in him still, more now than ever. They can remove him; they cannot remove Ireland. He may have made mistakes and misjudged characters; he may not have solved the immediate problem either wisely or well. But this he has done, to our honour and to his own: he has given us the cause of liberty as a sacred trust. If we break faith with that, we ourselves shall be broken—and we shall deserve it.

MRS. G. You think that—possible?

MORLEY. I would rather not think anything just now. The game is over; I must be going. Good night, dear friend; and if you sleep only as well as you deserve, I could wish you no better repose. Good-bye.

(*He moves toward the table from which the players are now rising.*)

GLADSTONE. That is a game, my dear Rendel, which came to this country nearly eight hundred years ago from the Crusades. Previously it had been in vogue among the nomadic tribes of the Arabian desert for more than a thousand years. It's very name, "backgammon," so English in sound, is but a corruption from the two Arabic words *bacca*, and *gamma* (my pronunciation of which stands subject to correction), meaning—if I remember rightly—"the board game." There, away East, lies its origin; its first recorded appearance in Europe was at the Sicilian Court of the Emperor Frederick II; and when the excommunication of Rome fell on him in the year 1283, the game was placed under an interdict, which, during the next four hundred years, was secretly but sedulously disregarded within those impregnably fortified places of learning and piety, to which so much of our Western civilisation is due, the abbeys and other scholastic foundations of the Benedictine order. The book-form, in which the board still conceals itself, stands as a memorial of its secretive preservation upon the shelves of the monastic libraries. I keep my own, with a certain touch of ritualistic observance, between this seventeenth century edition of the works of Roger Bacon and this more modern one, in Latin, of the writings of Thomas Aquinas; both of whom may not improbably have been practitioners of the game.

RENDEL. Very interesting, very interesting.

(*During this recitation Mr. Gladstone has neatly packed away the draughts and the dice, shutting them into their case finally and restoring it to its place upon the bookshelf.*)

GLADSTONE. My dear, I have won the rubber.

MRS. G. Have you, my dear? I'm very glad, if Lord Rendel does not mind.

RENDEL. To be beaten by Mr. Gladstone, ma'am, is a liberal education in itself.

MORLEY (*to his host*). I must say good-night, now, sir.

GLADSTONE. What, my dear Morley, must you be going?

MORLEY. For one of my habits it is almost late—eleven.

RENDEL. In that case I must be going, too. Can I drop you anywhere, Morley?

MORLEY. Any point, not out of your way, in the direction of my own door, I shall be obliged.

RENDEL. With pleasure. I will come at once.

And so—good-night, Mrs. Gladstone. Mr. Prime Minister, good-night.

GLADSTONE. Good-night, Rendel.

MORLEY (*aside to Mr. Gladstone*). I have done what you asked of me, sir.

GLADSTONE. I thank you. Good-night.

(*The two guests have gone; and husband and wife are left alone. He approaches, and stands near.*)

So Morley has told you, my dear?

MRS. G. That you are going down to Windsor to-morrow? Yes, William. You will want your best frock-suit, I suppose?

GLADSTONE. My best and my blackest would be seemly under the circumstances, my love. This treble-dated crow will keep the obsequies as strict as Court etiquette requires, or as his wardrobe may allow. I have a best suit, I suppose?

MRS. G. Yes, William. I keep it put away for you.

GLADSTONE (*after a meditative pause begins to recite*).

"Come, thou who art the wine and wit
Of all I've writ:
The grace, the glory, and the best
Piece of the rest,
Thou art, of what I did intend,
The all and end;
And what was made, was made to meet
Thee, thee, my sheet!"

Herrick, to his shroud, my dear! A poet who has the rare gift of being both light and spiritual in the same breath. Read Herrick at his gravest, when you need cheering; you will always find him helpful.

MRS. G. Then—will you read him to me to-night, William?

GLADSTONE. Why, certainly, my love, if you wish.

(*He stoops and kisses her.*)

MRS. G. (*speaking very gently*). I was waiting for that.

GLADSTONE. And I was waiting—for what you have to say.

MRS. G. I can say nothing.

GLADSTONE. Why, nothing?

MRS. G. Because I can't be sure of you, my dear. You've done this before.

GLADSTONE. This time it has been done for me. My own say in the matter has been merely to acquiesce.

MRS. G. Ah! so you say! And others—others may say it for you; but——

GLADSTONE. Anno Domini says it, my dear.

MRS. G. Anno Domini has been saying it for the last twenty years. Much heed you paid to Anno Domini.

GLADSTONE. You never lent it the weight of your counsels, my own love—till now.

MRS. G. I know, William, when talking is useless.

GLADSTONE. Ah! I wonder—if I do.

MRS. G. No; that's why I complain. Twenty years ago you said you were going to retire from politics and take up theology again—that you were old, and had come to an end. Why, you were only just beginning! And it will always be the same; any day something may happen—more Bulgarian atrocities, or a proposal for Welsh disestablishment. Then you'll break out again!

GLADSTONE. But I am in favour of Welsh disestablishment, my dear—when it comes.

MRS. G. Are you? Oh, yes; I forgot. You are in favour of so many things you didn't used to be. Well, then, it will be something else. You will always find an excuse; I shall never feel safe about you.

GLADSTONE (*in moved tone*). And if you could feel safe about me—what then?

MRS. G. Oh, my dear, my dear, if I could! Always I've seen you neglecting yourself—always putting aside your real interests—the things that you most inwardly cared about, the things which you always meant to do when you "had time." And here I have had to sit and wait for the time that never came. Isn't that true?

GLADSTONE. There is an element of truth in it, my dear.

MRS. G. Well, twenty years have gone like that, and you've "had no time." Oh, if you could only go back to the things you meant to do, twenty years ago—and take them up, just where you left off—why, I should see you looking—almost young again. For you've been looking tired lately, my dear.

GLADSTONE. Tired? Yes: I hoped not to have shown it. But three weeks ago I had to own to myself that I was beginning to feel tired. I went to Crichton Browne (I didn't tell you, my love); he

said there was nothing the matter with me—except old age.

MRS. G. You should have come to me, my dear; I could have told you the only thing to do.

GLADSTONE. Is it too late to tell me now?

MRS. G. Yes; because now you've done it, without my advice, William. Think of that! For the first time!

GLADSTONE (*gravely surprised*). So you have been wishing it, have you?

(*And the devoted wife, setting her face, and steadying her voice, struggles on to give him what comfort she may, in the denial of her most cherished hopes.*)

MRS. G. I've been waiting, waiting, waiting for it to come. But it was the one thing I couldn't say, till you—till you thought of it yourself!

GLADSTONE. Did I do so? Or did others think of it for me? I'm not sure; I'm not sure. My judgment of the situation differed from theirs. I couldn't carry them with me. In my own Cabinet I was a defeated man. Only Morley stood by me then.

(*Deep in the contemplation of his last political defeat, he is not looking at her face;*

and that is as well. Her voice summons him almost cheerfully from his reverie.)

MRS. G. William dear, can you come shopping with me to-morrow? Oh, no, to-morrow you are going to Windsor. The day after, then.

GLADSTONE. What is that for, my dear?

MRS. G. We have to get something for Dorothy's birthday, before we go home. You mustn't forget things like that, you know. Dorothy is important.

GLADSTONE. Not merely important, my love; she is a portent—of much that we shall never know. Dorothy will live to see the coming of the new age.

MRS. G. The new age? Well, so long as you let it alone, my dear, it may be as new as it likes; I shan't mind.

GLADSTONE. We will leave Dorothy to manage it her own way.

MRS. G. Then you will shop with me—not to-morrow—Thursday?

GLADSTONE. Piccadilly, or Oxford Street?

MRS. G. I thought Gamage's.

GLADSTONE. Holborn? That sounds adventurous. Yes, my love, I will shop with you on Thursday—if

all goes well at Windsor to-morrow—with all the contentment in the world. (*They kiss.*) Now go to bed; and presently I will come and read Herrick to you.

(*She gets up and goes toward the door, when her attention is suddenly arrested by the carpet.*)

MRS. G. William! Do you see how this carpet is wearing out? We shall have to get a new one.

GLADSTONE. It won't be necessary now. Those at Hawarden, if I remember rightly, are sufficiently new to last out our time.

MRS. G. I wish I could think so, my dear. They would if you didn't give them such hard wear, walking about on them. The way you wear things out has been my domestic tragedy all along!

GLADSTONE (*standing with folded hands before her*). My love, I have just remembered; I have a confession to make.

MRS. G. What, another? Oh, William!

GLADSTONE. I cannot find either of my comforters. I'm afraid I have lost them. I had both this morning, and now both are gone.

MRS. G. Why, you are worse than ever, my dear!

Both in one day! You have not done that for twenty years.

GLADSTONE. I am sorry. I won't do it again.

MRS. G. Ah! so you say! Poor Mr. Morley will have to wait now. I had promised him this. There!

(*Making him sit down, she puts the comforter round his neck, and gives him a parting kiss.*)

And now I'm going.

GLADSTONE. Go, my love! I will come presently.

(*But he has not quite got rid of her. Her hands are now reaching down to the back of the sofa behind him.*)

What are you looking for?

MRS. G. My knitting-needles. You are sitting on them. Now mind, you are not to sit up!

GLADSTONE. I won't sit up long.

(*Quietly and serenely she goes to the door, looks back for a moment, then glides through it, leaving behind a much-deceived husband, who will not hear the sound of her solitary weeping, or see any signs of it on her face when presently*

he comes to read Herrick at her bedside.)

(*For while he sits silent, peacefully encompassed in the thoughts with which she has provided him; then very slowly he speaks.*)

GLADSTONE. Well, if it pleases her—I suppose it must be right!

CURTAIN

Possession

Dramatis Personæ

Julia Robinson Laura James Martha Robinson	*Sisters*
Susan Robinson . .	*Their Mother*
Thomas Robinson . .	*Their Father*
William James . .	*Husband to Laura James*
Hannah	*The family servant*

Possession

A Peep-Show in Paradise

SCENE.—*The Everlasting Habitations*

It is evening (or so it seems) and to the comfortably furnished Victorian drawing-room a middle-aged maid-servant in cap and apron brings a lamp and proceeds to draw blinds and close curtains. To do this she passes the fire-place, where before a pleasantly bright hearth sits, comfortably sedate, an elderly lady whose countenance and attitude suggest the very acme of genteel repose. She is a handsome woman, very conscious of herself, but carrying the burden of her importance with an ease which, in her own mind, leaves nothing to be desired. The once-striking outline of her features has been rounded by good feeding to a softness which is merely physical; and her voice, when she speaks, has a calculated gentleness very caressing to her own ear, and a little irritating to others who are not of an inferior class. Menials like it, how-

ever. The room, though over-upholstered, and not furnished with any more individual taste than that which gave its generic stamp to the great Victorian period, is the happy possessor of some good things. Upon the mantel-shelf, backed by a large mirror, stands old china in alternation with alabaster jars, under domed shades, and tall vases encompassed by pendant ringlets of glass-lustre. Rose-wood, walnut, and mahogany make a well-wooded interior; and in the dates thus indicated there is a touch of Georgian. But, over and above these mellowing features of a respectable ancestry, the annunciating Angel of the Great Exhibition of 1851 *has spread a brooding wing. And while the older articles are treasured on account of family association, the younger and newer stand erected in places of honour by reason of an intrinsic beauty never previously attained to. Through this chamber the dashing crinoline has wheeled the too vast orb of its fate, and left fifty years after (if we may measure the times of Heaven by the ticks of an earthly chronometer) a mark which nothing is likely to erase. Upon the small table where Hannah the servant deposits the lamp lies a piece of crochet-work. The fair hands that have been employed on it are folded on a lap of corded silk representing the fashions of the nineties, and the grey-haired beauty that once was sits contemplative, wearing a cap of creamish lace,*

tastefully arranged, not unaware that in the entering lamp-light, and under the fire's soft glow of approval, she presents to her domestic's eye an improving picture of gentility. It is to Miss Julia Robinson's credit—and she herself places it there emphatically—that she always treats servants humanly—though at a distance. And when she now speaks she confers her slight remark just a little as though it were a favour.

JULIA. How the days are drawing out, Hannah.

HANNAH. Yes, Ma'am; nicely aren't they?

(*For Hannah, being old-established, may say a thing or two not in the strict order. In fact, it may be said that, up to a well-understood point, character is encouraged in her, and is allowed to peep through in her remarks.*)

JULIA. What time is it?

HANNAH (*looking with better eyes than her mistress at the large ormulu clock which records eternally the time of the great Exhibition*). Almost a quarter to six, Ma'am.

JULIA. So late? She ought to have been here long ago.

HANNAH. Who, Ma'am, did you say, Ma'am?

JULIA. My sister, Mrs. James. You remember?

HANNAH. What, Miss Martha, Ma'am? Well!

JULIA. No, it's Miss Laura this time: you didn't know she had married, I suppose?

HANNAH (*with a world of meaning, well under control*). No, Ma'am. (*A pause.*) I made up the bed in the red room; was that right, Ma'am?

JULIA (*archly surprised*). What? Then you knew someone was coming? Why did you pretend, Hannah?

HANNAH. Well, Ma'am, you see, you hadn't *told* me before.

JULIA. I couldn't. One cannot always be sure. (*This mysteriously.*) But something tells me now that she is to be with us. I have been expecting her over four days.

HANNAH (*picking her phrases a little, as though on doubtful ground*). It must be a long way, Ma'am. Did she make a comfortable start, Ma'am?

JULIA. Very quietly, I'm told. No pain.

HANNAH. I wonder what she'll be able to eat now, Ma'am. She was always very particular.

JULIA. I daresay you will be told soon enough.

(*Thus in veiled words she conveys that Hannah knows something of Mrs. James's character*).

HANNAH (*resignedly*). Yes, M'm——

JULIA. I don't think I'll wait any longer. If you'll bring in tea now. Make enough for two, in case: pour it off into another pot, and have it under the tea-cosy.

HANNAH. Yes, Ma'am.

(*Left alone, the dear lady enjoys the sense of herself and the small world of her own thoughts in solitude. Then she sighs indulgently.*)

JULIA. Yes, I suppose I would rather it had been Martha. Poor Laura! (*She puts out her hand for her crochet, when it is arrested by the sound of a knock, rather rapacious in character.*) Ah, that's Laura all over!

(*Seated quite composedly and fondling her well-kept hands, she awaits the moment of arrival. Very soon the door opens, and the over-expected Mrs. James—a luxuriant garden of widow's weeds, enters. She is a lady more strongly and sharply featured than her sister, but there is nothing thin-lipt about her; with*

resolute eye and mouth a little grim, yet pleased at so finding herself, she steps into this chamber of old memories and cherished possessions, which translation to another and a better world has made hers again. For a moment she sees the desire of her eyes and is satisfied; but for a moment only. The apparition of another already in possession takes her aback.)

JULIA (*with soft effusiveness*). Well, Laura!

LAURA (*startled*). Julia!

JULIA. *Here* you are!

LAURA. Whoever thought of finding you?

JULIA (*sweetly*). Didn't you?

(*They have managed to embrace: but Laura continues to have her grievance.*)

LAURA. No! not for a moment. I really thought they might have told me. What brought you?

JULIA. Our old home, Laura. It was a natural choice, I think, as one was allowed to choose. I suppose you were?

LAURA (*her character showing*). I didn't ask anyone's leave to come.

JULIA. And how are you?

LAURA. I don't know; I want my tea.

JULIA. Hannah is just bringing it.

LAURA. Who's Hannah?

JULIA. *Our* Hannah: our old servant. Didn't *she* open the door to you?

LAURA. What? Come back, has she?

JULIA. I found her here when I came, seven years ago. I didn't ask questions. Here she is.

(ENTER *Hannah with the tea-tray.*)

LAURA (*with a sort of grim jocosity*). How d'ye do, Hannah?

HANNAH. Nicely thank you, Ma'am. How are you Ma'am?

(*Hannah, as she puts down the tray, is prepared to have her hand shaken: for it is a long time* (*thirty years or so in earthly measure*) *since they met. But Mrs. James is not so cordial as all that.*)

LAURA. I'm very tired.

JULIA. You've come a long way.

(*But Laura's sharp attention has gone elsewhere.*)

LAURA. Hannah, what have you got my best tray for? You know that is not to be used every day.

JULIA. It's all right, Laura. You don't understand.

LAURA. What don't I understand?

JULIA. Here one always uses the best. Nothing wears out or gets broken.

LAURA. Then where's the pleasure of it? If one always uses them and they never break—'best' means nothing!

JULIA. It is a little puzzling at first. You must be patient.

LAURA. I'm not a child, Julia.

JULIA (*beautifully ignoring*). A little more coal, please, Hannah. (*Then to her sister as she pours out the tea.*) And how did you leave everybody?

LAURA. Oh, pretty much as usual. Most of 'em having colds. That's how I got mine. Mrs. Hilliard came to call and left it behind her. I went out with it in an east wind and that finished me.

JULIA. Oh, but how provoking! (*She wishes to*

be sympathetic; but this is a line of conversation she instinctively avoids.)

LAURA. *No,* Julia! . . . (*This, delivered with force, arrests the criminal intention.*) *No* sugar. To think of your forgetting that!

JULIA (*most sweetly*). Milk?

LAURA. Yes; you know I take milk.

(*Crossing over, but sitting away from the tea-table, she lets her sister wait on her.*)

JULIA. Did Martha send me any message?

LAURA. How could she? She didn't know I was coming.

JULIA. Was it so sudden?

LAURA. I sent for her and she didn't come. Think of that!

JULIA. Oh! She would be sorry. Tea-cake?

LAURA (*taking the tea-cake that is offered her*). I'm not so sure. She was nursing Edwin's boy through the measles, so of course *I* didn't count. (*Nosing suspiciously.*) Is this China tea?

JULIA. If you like to think it. You have as you choose. How is our brother, Edwin?

LAURA. His wife's more trying than ever. Julia, what a fool that woman is!

JULIA. Well, let's hope he doesn't know it.

LAURA. He must know. I've told him. She sent a wreath to my funeral, "With love and fond affection from Emily." Fond fiddlesticks! Humbug! She knows I can't abide her.

JULIA. I suppose she thought it was the correct thing.

LAURA. And I doubt if it cost more than ten shillings. Now Mrs. Dobson—you remember her: she lives in Tudor Street with a daughter one never sees—something wrong in her head, and has fits—she sent me a cross of lilies, white lilac, and stephanotis, as handsome as you could wish; and a card—and I forget what was on the card. . . . Julia, when you died——

JULIA. Oh, don't Laura!

LAURA. Well, you did die, didn't you?

JULIA. Here one doesn't talk of it. That's over. There are things you will have to learn.

LAURA. What I was going to say was—when I died I found my sight was much better. I could read all the cards without my glasses. Do *you* use glasses?

JULIA. Sometimes, for association. I have these of our dear Mother's in her tortoise-shell case.

LAURA. That reminds me. Where is our Mother?

JULIA. She comes—sometimes.

LAURA. Why isn't she here always?

JULIA (*with pained sweetness*). I don't know, Laura. I never ask questions.

LAURA. Really, Julia, I shall be afraid to open my mouth presently!

JULIA (*long-suffering still*). When you see her you will understand. I told her you were coming, so I daresay she will look in.

LAURA. 'Look in'!

JULIA. Perhaps. That is her chair, you remember. She always sits there, still.

(ENTER *Hannah with the coal.*)

Just a little on, please, Hannah—only a little.

LAURA. This isn't China tea: it's Indian, three and sixpenny.

JULIA. Mine is ten shilling China.

LAURA. Lor' Julia! How are you able to afford it?

JULIA. A little imagination goes a long way here, you'll find. Once I tasted it. So now I can always taste it.

LAURA. Well! I wish I'd known.

JULIA. Now you *do*.

LAURA. But I never tasted tea at more than three-and-six. Had I known, I could have got two ounces of the very best, and had it when——

JULIA. A lost opportunity. Life is full of them.

LAURA. Then you mean to tell me that if I had indulged more then, I could indulge more now?

JULIA. Undoubtedly. As I never knew what it was to wear sables, I have to be content with ermine.

LAURA. Lor', Julia, how paltry!

(While this conversation has been going on a gentle old lady has appeared upon the scene, unnoticed and unannounced. One perceives, that is to say, that the high-backed arm-chair beside the fire, sheltered by a screen from all possibility of draughts, has an occupant. Dress and appearance show a doubly septuagenarian character: at the age of seventy,

which in this place she retains as the hall-mark of her earthly pilgrimage, she belongs also to the 'seventies' of the last century, wears watered silk, and retains under her cap a shortened and stiffer version of the side-curls with which she and all 'the sex' captivated the hearts of Charles Dickens and other novelists in their early youth. She has soft and indeterminate features, and when she speaks her voice, a little shaken by the quaver of age, is soft and indeterminate also. Gentle and lovable, you will be surprised to discover that she, also, has a will of her own; but for the present this does not show. From the dimly illumined corner behind the lamp her voice comes soothingly to break the discussion.)

OLD LADY. My dear, would you move the light a little nearer? I've dropped a stitch.

LAURA (*starting up*). Why, Mother dear, when did you come in?

JULIA (*interposing with arresting hand*). Don't! You mustn't try to touch her, or she goes.

LAURA. Goes?

JULIA. I can't explain. She is not quite herself. She doesn't always hear what one says.

LAURA (*assertively*). She can hear me. (*To prove it, she raises her voice defiantly.*) Can't you, Mother?

MRS. R. (*the voice perhaps reminding her*). Jane, dear, I wonder what's become of Laura, little Laura: she was always so naughty and difficult to manage, so different from Martha—and the rest.

LAURA. Lor', Julia! Is it as bad as that? Mother, 'little Laura' is here sitting in front of you. Don't you know me?

MRS. R. Do you remember, Jane, one day when we'd all started for a walk, Laura had forgotten to bring her gloves and I sent her back for them? And on the way she met little Dorothy Jones, and she took her gloves off her, and came back with them just as if they were her own.

LAURA. What a good memory you have, Mother! I remember it too. She was an odious little thing, that Dorothy—always so whiney-piney.

JULIA. More tea, Laura?

(*Laura pushes her cup at her without remark, for she has been kept waiting, then in*

loud tones to suit the one whom she presumes to be rather deaf)

LAURA. Mother! Where are you living now?

MRS. R. I'm living, my dear.

LAURA. I said 'where?'

JULIA. We live where it suits us, Laura.

LAURA. Julia, I wasn't addressing myself to you. Mother, where *are* you living? . . . Why, *where* has she gone to?

(*For now we perceive that this gentle Old Lady so devious in her conversation has a power of self-possession, of which, very retiringly, she avails herself.*)

JULIA (*improving the occasion as she hands back the cup, with that touch of superiority so exasperating to a near relative*). Now you see! If you press her too much, she goes. . . . You'll have to accommodate yourself, Laura.

LAURA (*imposing her own explanation*). I think you gave me *green* tea, Julia . . , or have had it yourself.

JULIA (*knowing better*). The dear Mother seldom stays long, except when she finds me alone.

(*Having insinuated this barb into the flesh of her 'dear sister' she takes up her crochet with an air of great contentment. Mrs. James, meanwhile, to make herself more at home, now that tea is finished, undoes her bonnet-strings with a tug, and lets them hang. She is not in the best of tempers.*)

LAURA. I don't believe she recognised me. Why did she keep on calling me 'Jane'?

JULIA. She took you for poor Aunt Jane, I fancy.

LAURA (*infuriated at being taken for anyone 'poor'*). Why should she do that, pray?

JULIA. Well, there always was a likeness, you know; and you are older than you were, Laura.

LAURA (*crushingly*). Does poor Aunt Jane wear widow's weeds? (*This reminds her not only of her own condition, but of other things as well. She sits up and takes a still bigger bite into her new world.*) Julia! . . . Where's William?

JULIA. I haven't inquired.

LAURA (*self-importance and a sense of duty consuming her*). I wish to see him.

JULIA. Better not, as it didn't occur to you before.

LAURA. Am I not to see my own husband, pray?

JULIA. He didn't ever live *here,* you know.

LAURA. He can come, I suppose. He has got legs like the rest of us.

JULIA. Yes, but one can't force people: at least, not here. You should remember, that—before he married you—he had other ties.

(*Mrs. James preserves her self-possession, but there is battle in her eye.*)

LAURA. He was married to me longer than he was to Isabel.

JULIA. They had children.

LAURA. I could have had children if I chose. I didn't choose. . . . Julia, how am I to see him?

JULIA (*washing her hands of it*). You must manage for yourself, Laura.

LAURA. I'm puzzled! Here are we in the next world just as we expected, and where are all the——I mean, oughtn't we to be seeing a great many more things than we do?

JULIA. What sort of things?

LAURA. Well, . . . have you seen Moses and the Prophets?

JULIA. I haven't looked for them, Laura. On Sundays, I still go to hear Mr. Moore.

LAURA. That's you all over! You never would go to hear the celebrated preachers. But I mean to. . . . What happens here, on Sundays?

JULIA (*smiling*). Oh, just the same.

LAURA. No *High* Church ways, I hope? If they go in for that here, I shall go out!

JULIA (*patiently explanatory*). You will go out if you wish to go out. You can choose your church. As I tell you, I always go to hear Mr. Moore; you can go and hear Canon Farrar.

LAURA. Dean Farrar, I *suppose* you mean.

JULIA. He was not Dean in my day.

LAURA. He ought to have been a Bishop—*Arch*-bishop, *I* think—so learned, and such a magnificent preacher. But I still wonder why we don't see Moses and the Prophets.

JULIA. Well, Laura, it's the world as we know it—that for the present. No doubt other things will come in time, gradually. But I don't know: I don't ask questions.

LAURA (*doubtfully*). I suppose it *is* Heaven, in a way, though?

JULIA. I have not had occasion to doubt it—yet, Laura.

LAURA (*who is not going to take theological guidance from anyone lower than Dean Farrar*). Julia, I shall start washing the old china again.

JULIA. As you like; nothing ever gets soiled here.

LAURA. It's all very puzzling. The world seems cut in half. Things don't seem *real*.

JULIA. *More* real, I should say. We have them—as we wish them to be.

LAURA. Then why can't we have our Mother, like other things?

JULIA. Ah! with persons it is different. We all belong to ourselves now. That one has to accept.

LAURA (*stubbornly*). Does William belong to *him*self?

JULIA. I suppose.

LAURA. It isn't Scriptural!

JULIA. It's better.

LAURA. Julia, don't be blasphemous!

JULIA. To consult William's wishes, I meant.

LAURA. But I want him. I've a right to him. If he didn't mean to belong to me he ought not to have married me.

JULIA. People make mistakes sometimes.

LAURA. Then they should stick to them. It's not honourable. Julia, I mean to have William!

JULIA (*resignedly*). You and he must arrange that between you.

LAURA (*making a dash for it*). William! William, I say! William!

JULIA. Oh, Laura, you'll wake the dead! (*She gasps, but it is too late: the hated word is out.*)

LAURA (*as one who will be obeyed*). William!

(*The door does not open; but there appears through it the indistinct figure of an elderly gentleman with a weak chin and a shifting eye. He stands irresolute and apprehensive; clearly his presence there is perfunctory. Wearing his hat and carrying a hand-bag, he seems merely to have looked in while passing.*)

JULIA. Apparently you are to have your wish. (*She waves an introductory hand; Mrs. James turns,*

and regards the unsatisfactory apparition with suspicion.)

LAURA. William, is that you?

WILLIAM. Yes, my dear; it's me.

LAURA. Can't you be more distinct than that?

WILLIAM. Why do you want me?

LAURA. Have you forgotten I'm your wife?

WILLIAM. I thought you were my widow, my dear.

LAURA. William, don't prevaricate. I am your wife, and you know it.

WILLIAM. Does a wife wear widow's weeds? A widow is such a distant relation: no wonder I look indistinct.

LAURA. How did I know whether I was going to find you here?

WILLIAM. Where else? But you look very nice as you are, my dear. Black suits you.

(*But Mrs. James is not to be turned off by compliments.*)

LAURA. William, who are you living with?

WILLIAM. With myself, my dear.

LAURA. Anyone else?

WILLIAM. Off and on I have friends staying.

LAURA. Are you living with Isabel?

WILLIAM. She comes in occasionally to see how I'm getting on.

LAURA. And how are you 'getting on'—without me?

WILLIAM. Oh, I manage—somehow.

LAURA. Are you living a proper life, William?

WILLIAM. Well, I'm *here,* my dear; what more do you want to know?

LAURA. There's a great deal I want to know. But I wish you'd come in and shut the door, instead of standing out there in the passage.

JULIA. The door *is* shut, Laura.

LAURA. Then I don't call it a door.

WILLIAM (*trying to make things pleasant.*) When is a door not a door? When it's a parent.

LAURA. William, I want to talk seriously. Do you know that when you died you left a lot of debts I didn't know about?

WILLIAM. I didn't know about them either, my dear. But if you had, it wouldn't have made any difference.

LAURA. Yes, it would! I gave you a very expensive funeral.

WILLIAM. That was to please yourself, my dear; it didn't concern me.

LAURA. Have you no self-respect? I've been at my own funeral to-day, let me tell you!

WILLIAM. Have you, my dear? Rather trying, wasn't that?

LAURA. Yes, it was. They've gone and put me beside you; and now I begin to wish they hadn't!

WILLIAM. Go and haunt them, for it!

(*At this Julia deigns a slight chuckle.*)

LAURA (*abruptly getting back to her own*). I had to go into a smaller house, William. And people knew it was because you'd left me badly off.

WILLIAM. That reflected on me, my dear, not on you.

LAURA. It reflected on me for ever having married you.

WILLIAM. I've often heard you blame yourself. Well, now you're free.

LAURA. I'm *not* free.

WILLIAM. You can be if you like. Hadn't you better?

LAURA (*sentimentally*). Don't you see I'm still in mourning for you, William?

WILLIAM. I appreciate the compliment, my dear. Don't spoil it.

LAURA. Don't be heartless!

WILLIAM. I'm not: far from it. (*He looks at his watch.*) I'm afraid I must go now.

LAURA. Why must you go?

WILLIAM. They are expecting me—to dinner.

LAURA. Who's 'they'?

WILLIAM. The children and their mother. They've invited me to stay the night.

(*Mrs. James does her best to conceal the shock this gives her. She delivers her ultimatum with judicial firmness.*)

LAURA. William, I wish you to come and live here with me.

(*William vanishes. Mrs. James in a fervour of virtuous indignation hastens to the door, opens it, and calls "William!" but there is no answer.*)

(*Julia, meanwhile, has rung the bell. Mrs. James still stands glowering in the doorway when she hears footsteps, and moves majestically aside for the returned penitent to enter; but alas! it is only Hannah, obedient to the summons of the bell. Mrs. James faces round and fires a shot at her.*)

LAURA. Hannah, you *are* an ugly woman.

JULIA (*faint with horror*). Laura!

HANNAH (*imperturbably*). Well, Ma'am, I'm as God made me.

JULIA. Yes, please, take the tea-things. (*Sotto voce, as Hannah approaches.*) I'm sorry, Hannah!

HANNAH. It doesn't matter, Ma'am. (*She picks up the tray expeditiously and carries it off.*)

(*Mrs. James eyes the departing tray, and is again reminded of something.*)

LAURA. Julia, where is the silver tea-pot?

JULIA. Which, Laura?

LAURA. Why, that beautiful one of our Mother's.

JULIA. When we shared our dear Mother's things between us, didn't Martha have it?

LAURA. Yes, she did. But she tells me she doesn't know what's become of it. When I say, What did she do with it in the first place? she loses her temper. But once she told me she left it here with *you*.

(*The fierce eye and the accusing tone make no impression on that cushioned fortress of gentility. With suave dignity Miss Robinson makes chaste denial.*)

JULIA. No.

LAURA (*insistent*). Yes; in a box.

JULIA. In a box? Oh, she may have left anything in a box.

LAURA. It was that box she always travelled about with and never opened. Well, I looked in it once (never mind how), and the tea-pot wasn't there.

JULIA (*gently, making allowance*). Well, I *didn't* look in it, Laura.

(*Like a water-lily folding its petals she adjusts a small shawl about her shoulders and sinks composedly into her chair.*)

LAURA. The more fool you! . . . But all the other things she had of our Mother's *were* there: a perfect magpie's nest! And she, living in her boxes, and never settling anywhere. What did she want with them?

JULIA. I can't say, Laura.

LAURA. No—no more can I, no more can anyone! Martha has got the miser spirit. She's as grasping as a caterpillar. *I* ought to have had that tea-pot.

JULIA. Why?

LAURA. Because I had a house of my own, and people coming to tea. Martha never had anyone to tea with her in her life—except in lodgings.

JULIA. We all like to live in our own way. Martha liked going about.

LAURA. Yes. She promised *me*, after William—I suppose I had better say " evaporated " as you won't let me say " died "—she promised always to stay with me for three months in the year. She never did. Two, and some little bits, were the most. And I want to know where was that tea-pot all the time?

JULIA (*a little jocosely*). Not in the box, apparently.

LAURA (*returning to her accusation*). I thought you had it.

JULIA. You were mistaken. Had I had it here, you would have found it.

LAURA. Did Martha never tell *you* what she did with it?

JULIA. I never asked, Laura.

LAURA. Julia, if you say that again, I shall scream.

JULIA. Won't you take your things off?

LAURA. Presently. When I feel more at home. (*Returning to the charge.*) But most of our Mother's things are here.

JULIA. Your share and mine.

LAURA. How did you get mine here?

JULIA. You brought them. At least, they *came*, a little before you did. Then I knew you were on your way.

LAURA (*impressed*). Lor'! So that's how things happen?

(*She goes and begins to take a look round, and Julia takes up her crochet again. As she does so her eye is arrested by a little old-fashioned hour-glass standing upon the table from which the tea-tray has been taken, the sands of which are still running.*)

JULIA (*softly, almost to herself*). Oh, but how strange! That was Martha's. Is Martha coming too? (*She picks up the glass, looks at it, and sets it down again.*)

LAURA (*who is examining the china on a side-table*). Why, I declare, Julia! Here is your Dresden that was broken—without a crack in it!

JULIA. No, Laura, it was yours that was broken.

LAURA. It was *not* mine; it was yours. . . . Don't you remember *I* broke it?

JULIA. When you broke it you said it was mine. Until you broke it, you said it was yours.

LAURA. Very well, then: as you wish. It isn't broken now, and it's mine.

JULIA. That's satisfactory. I get my own back again. It's the better one.

(ENTER *Hannah with a telegram on a salver.*)

HANNAH (*in a low voice of mystery*). A telegram, Ma'am.

(*Julia opens it. The contents evidently startle her, but she retains her presence of mind.*)

JULIA. No answer.

(EXIT *Hannah.*)

JULIA. Laura, Martha is coming!

LAURA. Here? Well, I wonder how she has managed that!

(*Her sister hands her the telegram, which she reads.*)

"Accident. Quite safe. Arriving by the 6.30." Why, it's after that now!

JULIA (*sentimentally*). Oh, Laura, only think! So now we shall be all together again.

LAURA. Yes, I suppose we shall.

JULIA. It will be quite like old days.

LAURA (*warningly, as she sits down again and prepares for narrative*). Not *quite*, Julia. (*She leans forward, and speaks with measured emphasis.*) Martha's temper's got very queer! She never had a very good temper, as you know: and it's grown on her.

(*A pause. Julia remains silent.*)

I could tell you some things; but—— (*Seeing herself unencouraged.*) Oh, you'll find out soon enough! (*Then, to stand right with herself.*) Julia, *am* I difficult to get on with?

JULIA. Oh, well; we all have our little ways, Laura.

LAURA. But Martha, she's so rude! I can't introduce her to people! If anyone comes, she just runs away.

JULIA (*changing the subject*). D'you remember, Laura, that charming young girl we met at Mrs. Somervale's, the summer Uncle Fletcher stayed with us?

LAURA. I can't say I do.

JULIA. I met her the other day: married, and with three children—and just as pretty and young-looking as ever.

(*All this is said with the most ravishing air; but Laura is not to be diverted.*)

LAURA. Ah! I daresay. When Martha behaves like that, I hold my tongue and say nothing. But what people must think, I don't know. Julia, when you first came here, did you find old friends and acquaintances? Did anybody recognise you?

JULIA. A few called on me: nobody I didn't wish to see.

LAURA. Is that odious man who used to be our next-door neighbour—the one who played on the 'cello—here still?

JULIA. Mr. Harper? I see him occasionally. I don't find him odious.

LAURA. *Don't you?*

JULIA. It was his wife who was the—— She isn't here: and I don't think he wants her.

LAURA. Where is she?

JULIA. I didn't ask, Laura.

(*Mrs. James gives a jerk of exasperation, but at that moment the bell rings and a low knock is heard.*)

JULIA (*ecstatically*). Here she is!

LAURA. Julia, I wonder how it is Martha survived us. She's much the oldest.

JULIA (*pleasantly palpitating*). Does it matter? Does it matter?

(*The door opens and in comes Martha. She has neither the distinction of look nor the force of character which belongs to her two sisters. Age has given a depression to the plain kindliness of her face, and there is a harassed look about her eyes. She peeps into the room a little anxiously, then enters, carrying a large flat box covered in purple paper which, in her further progress across the room she lays upon the table. She talks*

in short jerks and has a quick, hurried way of doing things, as if she liked to get through and have done with them. It is the same when she submits herself to the embrace of her relations.)

LAURA. Oh, so you've come at last. Quite time, too!

MARTHA. Yes, here I am.

JULIA. My dear Martha, welcome to your old home! (*Embracing her.*) How are you?

MARTHA. I'm cold. Well, Laura.

(*Between these two the embrace is less cordial, but it takes place.*)

LAURA. How did you come?

MARTHA. I don't know.

JULIA (*seeing harassment in her sister's eye*). Arrived safely, at any rate.

MARTHA. I think I was in a railway accident, but I can't be sure. I only heard the crash and people shouting. I didn't wait to see. I just put my fingers in my ears, and ran away.

LAURA. Why do you think it was a railway accident?

MARTHA. Because I was in a railway carriage. I

was coming to your funeral. If you'd told me you were ill, I'd have come before. I was bringing you a wreath. And then, as I tell you, there was a crash and a shout; and that's all I know about it.

LAURA. Lor', Martha! I suppose they'll have an inquest on you.

MARTHA (*stung*). I think they'd better mind their own business, and you mind yours!

JULIA. Laura! Here we don't talk about such things. They don't concern us. Would you like tea, Martha, or will you wait for supper?

MARTHA (*who has shaken her head at the offer of tea, and nodded a preference for supper.*) You know how I've always dreaded death.

JULIA. Oh, don't, my dear Martha! It's past.

MARTHA. Yes; but it's upset me. The relief, that's what I can't get over: the relief!

JULIA. Presently you will be more used to it.

(*She helps her off with her cloak.*)

MARTHA. There were people sitting to right and to left of me and opposite; and suddenly a sort of crash of darkness seemed to come all over me, and I saw nothing more. I didn't feel anything: only a sort of a jar here,

(*She indicates the back of her neck. Julia finds these anatomical details painful, and holds her hands deprecatingly; but Laura has no such qualms. She is now undoing the parcel which, she considers, is hers.*)

LAURA. I daresay it was only somebody's box from the luggage-rack. I've known that happen. I don't suppose for a minute that it was a railway accident.

(*She unfurls the tissue paper of the box and takes out the wreath.*)

JULIA. Why talk about it?

LAURA. Anyway, nothing has happened to these. "With fondest love from Martha." H'm. Pretty!

JULIA. Martha, would you like to go upstairs with your things? And you, Laura?

MARTHA. I will presently, when I've got warm.

LAURA. Not yet. Martha, why was I put into that odious shaped coffin? More like a canoe than anything. I said it was to be straight.

MARTHA. I'd nothing to do with it, Laura. I wasn't there. You know I wasn't.

LAURA. If you'd come when I asked you, you could have seen to it.

MARTHA. You didn't tell me you were dying.

LAURA. Do people tell each other when they are dying? They don't *know*. I told you I wasn't well.

MARTHA. You always told me that, just when I'd settled down somewhere else. . . . Of course I'd have come if I'd known! (*testily*).

JULIA. Oh, surely we needn't go into these matters now! Isn't it better to accept things?

LAURA. I like to have my wishes attended to. What was going to be done about the furniture? (*This to Martha.*) You know, I suppose, that I left it to the two of you—you and Edwin?

MARTHA. We were going to give it to Bella, to set up house with.

LAURA. *That's* not what I intended. I meant you to keep on the house and live there. Why couldn't you?

MARTHA (*with growing annoyance*). Well, *that's* settled now!

LAURA. It wasn't for Arabella. Arabella was never a favourite of mine. Why should Arabella have my furniture?

MARTHA. Well, you'd better send word, and have

it stored up for you till doomsday! Edwin doesn't want it; he's got enough of his own.

LAURA (*in a sleek, injured voice*). Julia, I'm going upstairs to take my things off.

JULIA. Very well, Laura.

(*Laura goes with a hurt air.*)

So you've been with Edwin, and his family?

MARTHA. Yes. I'm never well there; but I wanted the change.

JULIA. You mean, you had been staying with Laura?

MARTHA. I always go and stay with her, as long as I can—three months, I'm supposed to. But this year —well, I couldn't manage with it.

JULIA. Is she so much more difficult than she used to be?

MARTHA. Of course, I don't know what she's like here.

JULIA. Oh, she has been very much herself—*poor* Laura!

MARTHA. I know! Julia, I know! And I try to make allowances. All her life she's had her own

way with somebody. Poor William! Of course I know he had his faults. But he used to come and say to me: "Martha, I *can't* please her." Well, poor man, let's hope he's at peace now! Oh, Julia! I've just thought: whatever will poor William do? He's here, I suppose, somewhere?

JULIA. Oh yes. He's here, Martha.

MARTHA. She'll rout him out, depend on it.

JULIA. She has routed him out.

MARTHA. Has she?

JULIA (*shakes her head*). William won't live with her; he knows better.

MARTHA. Who will live with her, then? She's bound to get hold of somebody.

JULIA. Apparently she means to live here.

MARTHA. Then it's going to be me. I know it's going to be me. When we lived here before, it used to be poor Mamma.

JULIA. The dear Mother is quite capable of looking after herself, you'll find. You needn't belong to Laura if you don't like, Martha. I never let her take possession of me.

MARTHA. She never seemed to want to. I don't know how you manage it.

JULIA. Oh, we've had our little tussles. But here you will find it much easier. You can vanish.

MARTHA. What do you mean?

JULIA. I mean—vanish. It takes the place of wings. One can do it almost without knowing.

MARTHA. How do you do it?

JULIA. You just wish yourself elsewhere; and you come back when you like.

MARTHA. Have *you* ever done it?

JULIA (*with a world of meaning*). Not yet.

MARTHA. She won't like it. One doesn't belong to one's self, when she's about—nor does anything. I've had to hide my own things from her sometimes.

JULIA. I shouldn't wonder.

MARTHA. Do you remember the silver tea-pot?

JULIA. I've been reminded of it.

MARTHA. It was mine, wasn't it?

JULIA. Oh, of course.

MARTHA. Laura never would admit it was mine. She wanted it; so I'd no right to it.

JULIA. I had a little idea that was it.

MARTHA. For years she was determined to have it: and I was determined she shouldn't have it. And she didn't have it.

JULIA. Who did have it?

MARTHA. Henrietta *was* to. I sent it her as a wedding-present, and told her Laura was not to know. And, as she was in Australia, that seemed safe. Well, the ship it went out in was wrecked—all because of that tea-pot, I believe—so now it's at the bottom of the sea!

JULIA. Destiny!

MARTHA. She searched my boxes to try and find it: stole my keys! I missed them, but I didn't dare say anything. I used to wrap it in my night-gown and hide it in the bed during the day, and sleep with it under my pillow at night. And I was so thankful when Henrietta got married; so as to be rid of it!

JULIA. Hush!

(RE-ENTER *Mrs. James, her bonnet still on, with the strings dangling, and her cloak on her arm.*)

LAURA. Julia I've been looking at your room in there.

JULIA (*coldly*). Have you, Laura?

LAURA. It used to be our Mother's room.

JULIA. I don't need to be reminded of that: it is why I chose it. (*Rising gracefully from her chair, she goes to attend to the fire.*)

LAURA. Don't you think it would be much better for you to give it up, and let our Mother come back and live with us?

JULIA. She has never expressed the wish.

LAURA. Of course not, with you there.

JULIA. She was not there when I came.

LAURA. How could you expect it, in a house all by herself?

JULIA. I gave her the chance: I began by occupying my own room.

LAURA (*self-caressingly*). I wasn't here then. That didn't occur to you, I suppose? You seem to forget you weren't the only one.

JULIA. Kind of you to remind me.

LAURA. Saucy.

JULIA. Martha, will you excuse me a moment?

(*Polite to the last, she vanishes gracefully away from the vicinity of the coal-box.*

The place where she has been stooping knows her no more.)

LAURA (*rushing round the intervening table to investigate*). Julia!

(*Martha, who is quite as much surprised as Mrs. James, but less indignant.*)

MARTHA. Well! Did you ever?

LAURA (*facing about after vain search*). Does she think that is the proper way to behave to *me?* Julia!

MARTHA. It's no good, Laura. You know Julia as well as I do. If she makes up her mind to a thing——

LAURA. Yes. She's been waiting here to exercise her patience on me, and now she's happy! Well, she'll have to learn that this house doesn't belong to *her* any longer. She has got to accommodate herself to living with others. . . . I wonder how she'd like me to go and sit in that pet chair of hers?

JULIA (*softly reappearing in the chair which the "dear Mother" usually occupies*). You can go and sit in it if you wish, Laura.

LAURA (*ignoring her return*). Martha, do you remember that odious man who used to live next door, who played the 'cello on Sundays?

MARTHA. Oh yes, I remember. They used to hang out washing in the garden, didn't they?

LAURA (*very scandalously*). Julia is friends with him! They call on each other. His wife doesn't live with him any longer.

(*Julia rises and goes slowly and majestically out of the room.*)

LAURA (*after relishing what she conceives to be her rout of the enemy*). Martha, what do you think of Julia?

MARTHA. Oh, she's—— What do you want me to think of her?

LAURA. High and mighty as ever, isn't she? She's been here by herself so long she thinks the whole place is hers.

MARTHA. I daresay we shall settle down well enough presently. Which room are you sleeping in?

LAURA. Of course, I have my old one. Where do you want to go?

MARTHA. The green room will suit me.

LAURA. And Julia means to keep our Mother's room: I can see that. No wonder she won't come and stay.

MARTHA. Have you seen her?

LAURA. She just "looked in," as Julia calls it. I could see she'd hoped to find me alone. Julia always thought *she* was the favourite. I knew better.

MARTHA. How was she?

LAURA. Just her old self; but as if she missed something. It wasn't a *happy* face, until I spoke to her: then it all brightened up. . . . Oh, thank you for the wreath, Martha. Where did you get it?

MARTHA. Emily made it.

LAURA. That fool! Then she made her own too, I suppose?

MARTHA. Yes. That went the day before, so you got it in time.

LAURA. I thought it didn't look up to much. (*She is now contemplating Emily's second effort with a critical eye.*) Now a little maiden-hair fern would have made a world of difference.

MARTHA. I don't hold with flowers myself. I think it's wasteful. But, of course, one has to do it.

LAURA (*with pained regret*). I'm sorry, Martha; I return it—with many thanks.

MARTHA. What's the good of that? I can't give it back to Emily, now!

LAURA (*with quiet grief*). I don't wish to be a cause of waste.

MARTHA. Well, take it to pieces, then, and put it in water—or wear it round your head!

LAURA. Ten beautiful wreaths my friends sent me. They are all lying on my grave now! A pity that love is so wasteful! Well, I suppose I must go now and change into my cap. (*Goes to the door, where she encounters Julia.*) Why, Julia, you nearly knocked me down!

JULIA (*ironically*). I beg your pardon, Laura; it comes of using the same door. Hannah has lighted a fire in your room.

LAURA. That's sensible at any rate.

(EXIT *Mrs. James.*)

JULIA. Well? And how do you find Laura?

MARTHA. Julia, I don't know whether I can stand her.

JULIA. She hasn't got quite—used to herself yet.

MARTHA (*explosively*). Put that away somewhere!

(*She gives an angry shove to the wreath.*)

JULIA. Put it away! Why?

MARTHA (*furious*). Emily made it: and it didn't cost anything; and it hasn't got any maiden-hair fern in it; and it's too big to wear with her cap. So it's good for nothing! Put it on the fire! She doesn't want to see it again.

JULIA (*comprehending the situation, restores the wreath to its box*). Why did you bring it here, Martha?

MARTHA (*miserably*). I don't know. I just clung on to it. I suppose it was on my mind to look after it, and see it wasn't damaged. So I found I'd brought it with me. . . . I believe, now I think of it, I've brought some sandwiches, too. (*She routs in a small hand-bag.*) Yes, I have. Well, I can have them for supper. . . . Emily made those too.

JULIA. Then I think you'd better let Hannah have them—for the sake of peace.

MARTHA (*woefully*). I thought I *was* going to have peace here.

JULIA. It will be all right, Martha—presently.

MARTHA. Well, I don't want to be uncharitable; but I do wish—I must say it—I do wish Laura had been cremated.

(*This is the nearest she can do for wishing her sister in the place to which she*

thinks she belongs. But the uncremated Mrs. James now re-enters in widow's cap.)

LAURA. Julia, have you ever seen Papa, since you came here?

JULIA (*frigidly*). No, I have not.

LAURA. Has our Mother seen him?

JULIA. I haven't—— (*About to say the offending word, she checks herself.*) Mamma has *not* seen him: nor does she know his whereabouts.

LAURA. Does nobody know?

JULIA. Nobody that I know of.

LAURA. Well, but he must be somewhere. Is there no way of finding him?

JULIA. Perhaps you can devise one. I suppose, if we chose, we could go to him; but I'm not sure—as he doesn't come to us.

LAURA. Lor', Julia! Suppose he should be——

JULIA (*deprecatingly*). Oh, Laura!

LAURA. But, Julia, it's very awkward, not to know where one's own father is. Don't people ever ask?

JULIA. Never, I'm thankful to say.

LAURA. Why not?

JULIA. Perhaps *they* know better.

LAURA (*after a pause*). I'm afraid he didn't lead a good life.

MARTHA. Oh, why can't you let the thing be? If you don't remember him, I do. I was fond of him. He was always very kind to us as children; and if he did run away with the governess it was a good riddance—so far as she was concerned. We hated her.

LAURA. I wonder whether they are together still. You haven't inquired after *her,* I suppose?

JULIA (*luxuriating in her weariness*). I—have—*not,* Laura!

LAURA. Don't you think it's our solemn duty to inquire? I shall ask our Mother.

JULIA. I hope you will do nothing of the sort.

LAURA. But we ought to know: otherwise we don't know how to think of him, whether with mercy and pardon for his sins, or with reprobation.

MARTHA. Why need you think? Why can't you leave him alone?

LAURA. An immortal soul, Martha. It's no good leaving him alone: that won't alter facts.

JULIA. I don't think this is quite a nice subject for discussion.

LAURA. Nice? Was it ever intended to be nice? Eternal punishment wasn't provided as a consolation prize for anybody, so far as I know.

MARTHA. I think it's very horrible—for us to be sitting here—by the fire; and why can't you leave it?

(*But theology is not Martha's strong point: so she breaks off, exclaiming*)

Oh!

LAURA. Because it's got to be faced; and I mean to face it. Now, Martha, don't try to get out of it. We have got to find our Father.

JULIA. I think, before doing anything, we ought to consult Mamma.

LAURA. Very well, call her and consult her! You were against it just now.

JULIA. I am against it still. It's all so unnecessary.

MARTHA. Lor,' there *is* Mamma!

(*Old Mrs. Robinson is once more in her place. Martha makes a move toward her.*)

JULIA. Don't, Martha. She doesn't like to be——

MRS. R. I've heard what you've been talking about. No, I haven't seen him. I've tried to get him to come to me, but he didn't seem to want. Martha, my dear, how are you?

MARTHA. Oh, I'm—much as usual. And you, Mother?

MRS. R. Well, what about your Father? Who wants him?

LAURA. I want him.

MRS. R. What for?

LAURA. First we want to know what sort of a life he is leading. Then we want to ask him about his will.

JULIA. Oh, Laura!

MARTHA. *I* don't. I don't care if he made a dozen.

LAURA. So I thought if we all *called* him. *You* heard when I called, didn't you? Oh, no, that was William.

MRS. R. Who's William?

LAURA. Didn't you know I was married?

MRS. R. No. Did he die?

LAURA. Well, now, couldn't we call him?

MRS. R. I daresay. He won't like it.

LAURA. He must. He belongs to us.

MRS. R. Yes, I suppose—as I wouldn't divorce him, though he wanted me to. I said marriages were made in Heaven.

A VOICE. Luckily, they don't last there.

(Greatly startled, they look around, and perceive presently in the mirror over the mantel-piece the apparition of a figure which they seem dimly to recognise. A tall, florid gentleman of the Dundreary type, with long side-whiskers, and dressed in the fashion of sixty years ago, has taken up his position to one side of the ormolu clock; standing, eye-glass in eye, with folded arms resting on the mantel-slab, and a stylish hat in one hand, he gazes upon the assembled family with quizzical benevolence.)

MRS. R. *(placidly)*. What, is that you, Thomas?

THOMAS *(speaking with the fashionable lisp of the fifties which finds 's' an impediment)*. How do you do, Susan?

(There follows a pause, broken courageously by Mrs. James.)

LAURA. Are *you* my Father?

THOMAS. I don't know. Who are *you?* Who are all of you?

LAURA. I had better explain. This is our dear Mother: her you recognise. You are her husband, and we are your daughters. This is Martha, this is Julia, and I'm Laura.

THOMAS. Is this true, Susan? Are these our progeny?

MRS. R. Yes—that is—yes, Thomas.

THOMAS. I should not have known it. They all look so much older.

LAURA. Then when you left us? Naturally!

THOMAS. Then *me,* I meant.

LAURA. Because we have lived longer. Papa, when did you die?

JULIA. Oh! Laura!

THOMAS. I don't know, child.

LAURA. Don't know? How don't you know?

THOMAS. Because in prisons, and other lunatic asylums, one isn't allowed to know anything.

MRS. R. A lunatic asylum! Oh, Thomas, what brought you there?

THOMAS. A damned life, Susan—with you, and others.

JULIA. Oh, Laura, why did you do this?

MARTHA. If this goes on, I shall leave the room.

LAURA. Where are those "others" now?

THOMAS. Three of them I see before me. You, Laura, used to scream horribly. When you were teething I was sleepless. Your Mother insisted on having you in the room with us. No wonder I went elsewhere.

MARTHA. I'm going.

THOMAS. Don't, Martha. You were the quietest of the lot. When you were two years old I even began to like you. You were the exception.

LAURA. Haven't you any affection for your old home?

THOMAS. None. It was a prison. You were the gaolers and the turnkeys. To keep my feet in the domestic way you made me wool-work slippers, and I had to wear them. You gave me neckties, which I wouldn't wear. You gave me affection of a demanding kind, which I didn't want. You gave me a

moral atmosphere which I detested. And at last I could bear it no more, and I escaped.

LAURA (*deaf to instruction*). Papa, we wish you and our dear Mother to come back and live with us.

THOMAS. Live with my grandmother! How could I live with any of you?

LAURA. Where *are* you living?

THOMAS. Ask no questions, and you will be told no lies.

LAURA. Where is *she?*

THOMAS. Which she?

LAURA. The governess.

THOMAS. Which governess?

LAURA. The one you went away with.

THOMAS. D'you want her back again? You can have her. She'll teach you a thing or two. She did *me.*

LAURA. Then you have repented, Papa?

THOMAS. God! why did I come here?

MRS. R. Yes; why did you come? It was weak of you.

THOMAS. Because I never could resist women.

LAURA. Were you really mad when you died, Papa?

THOMAS. Yes, and am still: stark, staring, raving, mad, like all the rest of you.

LAURA. I am not aware that *I* am mad.

THOMAS. Then you are a bad case. Not to know it, is the worst sign of all. It's in the family: you can't help being. Everything you say and do, proves it. . . . You were mad to come here. You are mad to remain here. You were mad to want to see me. I was mad to let you see me. I was mad at the mere sight of you; and I'm mad to be off again! Good-bye, Susan. If you send for me again, I shan't come!

(*He puts on his hat with a flourish.*)

LAURA. Where are you going, Father?

THOMAS. To Hell, child! Your Hell, my Heaven!

(*He spreads his arms and rises up through the looking-glass; you see his violet frock-coat, his check trousers, his white spats, and patent-leather boots ascending into and passing from view. He twiddles his feet at them and vanishes.*)

JULIA. And now I hope you are satisfied, Laura?

MARTHA. Where's Mamma gone?

JULIA. So you've driven her away, too. Well, that finishes it.

(*Apparently it does. Robbed of her parental prey, Mrs. James reverts to the next dearest possession she is concerned about.*)

LAURA. Martha, where is the silver tea-pot?

MARTHA. I don't know, Laura.

LAURA. You said Julia had it.

MARTHA. I didn't say anything of the sort! You said—you supposed Julia had it; and I said—suppose she had! And I left it at that.

LAURA. Julia says she hasn't got it, so you *must* have it.

MARTHA. I haven't!

LAURA. Then where is it?

MARTHA. I don't know any more than Julia knows.

LAURA. Then one of you is not telling the truth. . . . (*Very judicially she begins to examine the two culprits.*) Julia, when did you last see it?

JULIA. On the day, Laura, when we shared things

between us. It became Martha's: and I never saw it again.

LAURA. Martha, when did you last see it?

MARTHA. I have not seen it—for I don't know how long.

LAURA. That is no answer to my question.

MARTHA (*vindictively*). Well, if you want to know, it's at the bottom of the sea.

LAURA (*deliberately*). Don't—talk—nonsense.

MARTHA. Unless a shark has eaten it.

LAURA. When I ask a reasonable question, Martha, I expect a reasonable answer.

MARTHA. I've given you a reasonable answer! And I wish the Judgment Day would come, and the sea give up its dead, and then—— (*At the end of her resources, the poor lady begins to gather herself up so as once for all to have done with it.*) Now, I am going downstairs to talk to Hannah.

LAURA. You will do nothing of the kind, Martha.

MARTHA. I'm not going to be bullied—not by you or anyone.

LAURA. I must request you to wait and hear what I've got to say.

MARTHA. I don't want to hear it.

LAURA. Julia, are we not to discuss this matter, pray?

(*Julia, who has her eye on Martha, and is quite enjoying this tussle of the two, says nothing.*)

MARTHA. You and Julia can discuss it. I am going downstairs.

(*Mrs. James crosses the room, locks the door, and, standing mistress of all she surveys, inquires with grim humour*)

LAURA. And where are you going to be, Julia?

JULIA. I am where I am, Laura. I'm not going out of the window, or up the chimney, if that's what you mean.

(*She continues gracefully to do her crochet.*)

LAURA. Now, Martha, if you please.

MARTHA (*goaded into victory*). I'm sorry, Julia. Perhaps you'll explain. I'm going downstairs.

(*Suiting the action to the word, she commits herself doggedly to the experiment, descending bluntly and without grace*

through the carpet into the room below. Mrs. James stands stupent.)

LAURA. Martha! . . . Am I to be defied in this way?

JULIA. You brought it on yourself, Laura.

LAURA. You told her to do it!

JULIA. She would have soon found out for herself. (*Collectedly, she folds up her work, and rises.*) And now, I think, I will go to my room and wash my hands for supper.

(*As she makes her stately move, her ear is attracted by a curious metallic sound repeated at intervals. Turning about, she perceives, indeed they both perceive, in the centre of the small table, a handsome silver tea-pot which opens and shuts its lid at them, as if trying to speak.*)

JULIA. Oh, look, Laura! Martha's tea-pot has arrived.

LAURA. She told a lie, then.

JULIA. No, it was the truth. She wished for it. The sea has given up its dead.

LAURA. Then I have got it at last!

(*But, as she goes to seize the disputed possession it snaps its lid at her, and emits a sharp hiss of steam. Laura starts back. Martha rises through the floor, grabs the tea-pot, and descends to the nether regions once more.*)

LAURA (*glaring at her sister with haggard eye*). Julia, where *are* we?

JULIA. I don't know what you mean, Laura. (*She reaches out a polite hand.*) The key.

(*Mrs. James delivers up the key as though glad to be rid of it.*)

LAURA. What is this place we've come to?

JULIA (*persuasively*). Our home.

LAURA. I think we are in Hell!

JULIA (*going to the door, which she unlocks with soft triumph*). We are all where we wish to be, Laura. (*A gong sounds.*) That's supper. (*The gong continues its metallic bumblings.*)

(*Julia departs, leaving Mrs. James in undisputed possession of the situation she has made for herself.*)

CURTAIN

BINDING SECT. JUN 14 1966

PR
4809
H18A75

Housman, Laurence
Angels & ministers

PLEASE DO NOT REMOVE
CARDS OR SLIPS FROM THIS POCKET

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO LIBRARY